

***Women's consciousness and assertion in colonial
India: Gender, social reform and politics in
Maharashtra, c.1870-c.1920.***

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the complexities of an emergent feminist consciousness among Maharashtrian women in the context of the socio-religious reform movements in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century India. It analyses how self-assertion was articulated through a gendered critique of Hindu religion and society. In constant interaction and at times in tension with the text-based colonial and indigenous discourses, their ideology it is argued was informed by experience.

Critical of Eurocentric models of feminism, this study adopts alternative methods of reading and defining colonial women's perceptions and protests. Thus, the study takes as its starting-point the view of the Maharashtrian woman herself as she engages with the state and Indian men.

In the first chapter the attempts of female converts to Christianity in negotiating with the changing world around them is studied. Christian women's pioneering welfare schemes are studied in detail showing how their feminist critiques and alternative lifestyles provided inspiration to women of their time. It is argued that their feminism was a result of their analysis of Hinduism and ultimate rejection of it. How Hindu women gained partial autonomy is studied through their separate female institution building programmes. However, it is argued that Hindu women's critique of Indian society and Hinduism and their action was constrained by their decision to stay within the Hindu structures.

In the third and fourth chapters on women's resistance various individual and collective forms of dissent by women against the state and Indian males are outlined which primarily point to survival issues being the core of resistance. A case-study of infanticide in chapter four shows women resisting cultural practices like the ban on widow-remarriage.

In the last two chapters, a study of the movement for higher education of females, legislation on restitution of conjugal rights, divorce and the age of consent is undertaken. While it demonstrates the participation of women in popular protest movements of the nineteenth century it also reveals a great divergence in the precepts and practices of the state and Indian men highlighting their unwillingness to hand over decision-making processes to women over gender-related issues.

The thesis concludes by attributing the fruition in feminist consciousness of women to a selective appropriation of dominant discourses of the time, namely those of the missionary, religious revivalist, orientalist and reformist. Finally, it is suggested that women themselves chose to join the nationalist politics of early twentieth century rather than being led into it by influential leaders like Gandhi.

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Note on citation

The first time a work is cited it is accompanied by complete details and in subsequent citations only a part of the author's name and title of work is given. Titles of all Marathi works are given in transliterated form with English translations in brackets. Subsequent citations of Marathi works indicate only a brief English translation. Diacritical marks are not used. All foreign words occurring for the first time within the text are accompanied immediately by a translation.

Names of towns (e.g., Poona) within the main text is retained rather than the new version 'Pune' in order to avoid confusion. Names of people (e.g., Rakhmabai) have been standardised once again to achieve consistency. A great inconsistency occurs in the pagination of the Judicial, General, Education proceedings at Maharashtra State Archives. Therefore I have avoided mentioning page numbers for these holdings.

Finally all errors, if any, are mine alone.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender history in India is a relatively new field. However, a number of useful and interesting works have appeared in the area recognised increasingly as Women's Studies. In the past decade several thematic concerns have dominated the field among them the marginalisation of women in the economy and popular culture;¹ the impact of colonial law and administrative policies on the role and status of women;² the reconstitution of patriarchies via the recasting of the concept of 'womanhood';³ and, more recently, the historical visibility of women.⁴ Although these works are significant contributions to gender studies, the twin aspects of the issue of consciousness and assertion amongst Indian women in the colonial past have not sufficiently engaged the attention of scholars working in the field.⁵

An example of these lacunae is expressed by the editor of a recent book on the women's history of India. He remarks of the volume:

¹Nirmala Banerjee, 'Working women in colonial Bengal: Modernisation and marginalisation', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), Recasting women: Essays in colonial history, (New Delhi, 1989), pp.269-301; Sumanta Banerjee, 'Marginalisation of women's popular culture in nineteenth-century Bengal', in ibid., pp.127-79.

²Among others, see Lucy Carroll, 'Law, custom and statutory social reform: The Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act of 1856', Indian Economic and Social History Review, 20:4, 1983, pp.363-89; Prem Chowdhry, 'Customs in a peasant economy: Women in colonial Haryana', in Sangari and Vaid (eds.), Recasting women, pp.302-36.

³Partha Chatterjee, 'Colonialism, nationalism and colonised women: The contest in India', in American Ethnologist, 16:4, Nov. 1989, pp.622-33; Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever happened to the Vedic dasi? Orientalism, nationalism and a script for the past', in Sangari and Vaid (eds.), Recasting women, pp.27-87.

⁴Recently the trend has shifted to emphasising the works of lesser-known women who have written unique texts questioning gender relations. See Rosalind O' Hanlon, For the honour of my sister countrywomen: Tarabai Shinde, the critique of gender relations in India, (forthcoming). Several anthologies are being published. The volumes edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha offer over 140 texts by women from 13 Indian languages from 600 B.C. to the early twentieth century. A large number of these texts are by unknown or less well-known women exhibiting a long tradition of female dissent in India. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha (eds.), Women writing in India, 600 B.C. to the present (New York, 1991).

⁵It is relevant to mention here that women's perceptions and participation in revolutionary movements have been studied but mainly at the height of the nationalist agitations of the twentieth century. A fine illustration of peasant and working women's voices in the Communist party-led Telengana struggle between 1946 and 1951 is Stree Shakti Sanghatana, (ed.), We were making history: Life stories of women in the Telengana people's struggle, (London, 1989).

If the papers have a common weakness - and in this they reflect the existing data base - it is that we hear the voices of women at large only rarely...⁶

His comment is significantly not about a monograph but a collection of essays published over the years on gender history in the Indian Economic and Social History Review. Female agency has so far been dealt with only via women's resistance to certain kinds of oppression.⁷ Also several thematic and regional studies have been done in the form of articles, notably on Maharashtra. However, such works do not contribute significantly to our understanding of the key issues of gender-based social reform and the early nationalist period.⁸

The liberal school of historiography, which largely follows the 'Western impact-Indian response' approach to nineteenth-century Indian social history, has projected Indian women as a monolithic and oppressed entity who were the beneficiaries of the 'awakening' experienced by their menfolk.⁹ One of the main problems of such a methodology informed by Western-centred paradigm is that it denies the ability of Indian women to act as conscious agents. Such a conceptual framework has the underlying assumption that the society which makes the impact has the truly active role and the one receiving it merely the reactive role. In addition, 'modern' is equated with Western and hence with superior and, on the other hand, the

⁶J. Krishnamurthy, Introduction to Women in colonial India: Essays on survival, work and the state, (New Delhi, 1989), p.ix.

⁷Recently Rosalind O'Hanlon has demonstrated women's protest against the effects of the changes in the relations between men and women through the text of Tarabai Shinde in colonial Maharashtra, 'Issues of widowhood: Gender and resistance in colonial western India', in Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (eds.), Contesting power: Resistance and everyday social relations in South Asia, (New Delhi, 1991), pp.62-108; Veena Talwar Oldenburg has argued that the very lifestyles of the courtesans of colonial Lucknow represent both autonomy and resistance to Indian patriarchy, 'Lifestyle as resistance: The case of the courtesans of Lucknow, India', in Feminist Studies, 16:2, 1990, pp.259-87.

⁸Jyotsna Kapur, 'Putting herself into the picture: Women's accounts of the social reform campaign in Maharashtra, mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', Manushi, no.56, 1990, pp.28-34.

⁹One of the earliest and most influential works following this framework is Charles Heimsath, Indian nationalism and Hindu social reform, (Princeton, 1964). Its approach is echoed in many of the works on reform by Indian historians including those on gender history. See for example B.R.Nanda (ed.), Indian women: From purdah to modernity, (New Delhi, 1976).

country projected as responding to the Western impact is portrayed in negative terms.¹⁰

Eurocentric bias has also affected the charting of protest and self-assertion movements in Afro-Asian women's history. This has been compounded by the lack of an alternative approach to define the experiences unique to women in colonial societies. The use of Western models to explain the Indian woman's situation has resulted in a great hesitancy among sympathetic Indianists to describe even the most radical women as 'feminists'.¹¹ Meredith Borthwick, who has enriched our understanding of the changing conditions of the bhadramahila ('respectable' middle-class Bengali women) during the period 1850-1905, has followed essentially approaches devised to study the history of women in the West. Following the Western-impact/Indian-response paradigm, she finds that the bhadramahila were emerging as a response to the bhadralok (middle-class Bengali men) who in turn were reacting to British rule.¹² It is not therefore, surprising that she finds no 'feminist consciousness' among the bhadramahila. In her words,

When I began my study I was interested in locating a 'feminist consciousness'. The possibility still interests me, but as I understand more about the lives of women at that time, the more misguided I feel it is to expect that kind of perception then.¹³

It is 'misguided' to 'expect' not because such a perception did not exist but because

¹⁰The questioning of the validity of such Western-centred approaches has started recently. For example, Paul A. Cohen, Discovering history in China: American historical writings on the recent Chinese past, (New York, 1984).

¹¹The only exception I have come across is Geraldine Forbes. See her work, 'Caged Tigers': First wave feminists in twentieth century Bengal', in Women's Studies International Forum, 5:6, 1982, pp.526-36.

¹²Meredith Borthwick, The changing condition of women in Bengal: 1850-1905, (Princeton, 1984).

¹³'Looking at women's history: nineteenth century Bengal', John McGuire, Meredith Borthwick and Brij V. Lal (eds.), Problems and methods of enquiry in South Asian history, (Nedlands, 1984), p.22.

the 'expectation' was already pre-determined by Western connotations of feminism.¹⁴ Ghulam Murshid's work on Bengali women's response to modernisation labours under similar problems even though a large part of the vernacular source material he uses are journals edited by women and include a few writings by some radical women of the period.¹⁵ A refreshingly different analysis has been offered by Malavika Karlekar in Voices from within, published in 1991. By treating autobiographical writings as 'personal narratives' she demonstrates a range of responses by nineteenth-century Bengali women. While tracing the formation of women's sub-cultures in the antahpur (inner house) she effectively shows how literacy and education enabled at least a few upper class Bengali women to question male constructions of Indian femininity.¹⁶

The present study aims to analyse the complexities of an emerging feminism among Maharashtrian women in the context of the social reform movements in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century colonial India. It traces the growth of feminist consciousness through the process of women's questioning of the 'position of women' in the dominant religion of the time, namely Hinduism. The first two chapters demonstrate how women developed a critique of gender relations while they engaged with the changing world around them. These two chapters highlight the various limitations, constraints and the different attitudes involved in the process of women's coming of their own depending on the degree of their acceptance and rejection of Hinduism. A protest movement was developing not only in the most obvious ways, i.e., through women's organisations, but also through their engagement with the dominant discourse on issues of widowhood, conjugal relations, women's education

¹⁴Recently a breakthrough has come about at least as far as questioning orientalist assumptions about non-western women which include concepts of veil and purdah in Muslim societies and anthropological theories on African societies and women. Some exciting works are Reza Hammami and Martina Rieker, 'Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Marxism', New Left Review, no.170, July/August 1988, pp.93-106; Malek Alloula, The colonial harem, Myrna Godwich and Wlad Godwich (tr.), (Manchester, 1987); Ifi Amadiume, Male daughters, female husbands, (London, 1987). Closer to home Chandra Mohanty has questioned some of the conceptual frameworks of the Zed series on Third World women in 'Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', Feminist Review, no.30, Autumn 1988, pp.61-88.

¹⁵Ghulam Murshid, Reluctant debutante: Response of Bengali women to modernisation, 1849-1905, (Rajshahi, 1983).

¹⁶Malavika Karlekar, Voices from within: Personal narratives of nineteenth century Bengali women, (New Delhi, 1991).

and domestic and social reforms. An analysis of women's own perceptions shows that far from being univocal, there were many dissenting voices and divergent groups among them. Caste, community, and class affiliation necessarily affected their perceptions, but an attempt has been made to show how solidarity over feminist concerns at critical times allowed them to overcome these divisions.¹⁷

Female agency arises when women are caught in negotiating with various kinds of power relations in an everyday context. Chapters Three and Four extend the arguments of the first two chapters by illuminating the process by which ideology is informed by experience. Various forms of individual and collective assertion are shown through women's effective use of colonial courts and petitioning. Women's resistance in popular literature and its functions are also delineated in Chapter Three. Chapter Four, considers how certain violent acts by women came to be defined as 'crimes'. By contrasting the voices of female offenders to that of the indigenous elites and the judiciary it is shown that women's 'crimes' are necessarily a product of extreme imbalance in gender relations and are linked inextricably to survival issues.

The thesis also seeks to answer the question whether Maharashtrian women's critiques of gender relations and the reform movements were male-inspired and whether their protests were male-initiated. An attempt is made to highlight, wherever possible and appropriate, the difference in the nature of the female and male discourses. It is argued that women were not seeking to redress their situation for the same reasons as those represented by the colonial and indigenous male discourses. By highlighting the differences and tensions within this multiplicity of discourses, it is hoped to illuminate the process by which Gandhi and the Indian nationalists were subsequently able to absorb the women's movement into the nationalist struggle. The current approach is to attribute women's public participation mainly to the Gandhian

¹⁷This study thus challenges some recent feminist viewpoints on Indian women, which while adopting postmodern approaches, conclude that the subaltern woman cannot speak and cannot be heard. See in particular, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, (Hampshire, 1980), pp.271-313; and 'The Rani of Sirmur: An essay in reading the archives', in *History and Theory*, Vol. 24, 1985, pp.247-72.

era.¹⁸ The racial conflict between the imperial and the colonial female had begun by the early twentieth century, as studied in Chapters Two and Five, which made large numbers of women join the anti-imperialist struggle of their own volition, rather than being led by charismatic male leaders. Such an approach leads to a more comprehensible understanding of the failure of the women's struggle in branching-off completely from the nationalist agenda.

An emerging feminist consciousness cannot be studied in isolation, but must be seen as an interaction with the colonial state and indigenous male discourse.¹⁹ Such an integrated approach throws light on some significant unanswered questions of the social history of this period.

First of all, why did Indian male reformers choose to select gender-related issues as the major plank of their socio-political programmes? Was there suddenly a growth of genuine concern for the plight of Indian women or was there an underlying political motive behind this concern? These problematic issues are covered in Chapters Five and Six. The answers are sought in a re-examination of indigenous discourse on a series of specific gender-based issues, notably higher education for women, legislation over the restitution of conjugal rights, divorce and the age of consent. A great divergence is revealed in their practice and precept as well as the unwillingness to hand over authority and decision-making processes to women. Sexual segregation and differentiation in schools (institutional legacies which persist in the present-day educational system in India) are traced to the deliberate policies of male reformers rather than being the conscious choice of women.

Second, the role of the colonial state in gender issues is taken up for consideration. The 'civilising' mission of the colonial power, manifested in its civil codes and criminal procedures, reveals that far from being progressive, as is

¹⁸Aparna Basu, 'The role of women in the Indian struggle for freedom', pp.16-40; Vina Mazumdar, 'The social reform movement in India - From Ranade to Nehru', in B.R.Nanda (ed.), Indian women from Purdah to modernity, pp.41-66. This approach is implied in other works too see Madhu Kishwar, 'Gandhi on women', The Economic and Political Weekly, 20:40, 5 Oct. 1985, pp.1691-1701.

¹⁹Recently Rosalind O'Hanlon has not only argued a case for an integrationist approach but also shown how, 'gender categories and relations were significant for the recruitment of men as agents of colonial power': 'Issues of widowhood', in Haynes and Prakash (eds.), Contesting power, p.64.

commonly assumed, the state was actually retrogressive, actively perpetuating the patriarchal and semi-feudal ideologies of Indian society. The colonial discourse about gender-based legislation also points to the increasingly political nature of the judiciary. Contrary to the established view that the power of the state was contracting during this period, in the aftermath of the Rebellion of 1857-8, there is evidence to suggest that in certain social and gender-related issues the state was highly interventionist.²⁰

It is necessary to define the term 'feminist' as it is, or can be, used in the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India. Recently a major debate has raged over the question of understanding feminism, not only among Western traditions, but among developing nations as well.²¹ This thesis follows three criteria to identify a feminist. They are : a) all women who exhibited consciousness of injustice towards women as a group either by men, religion, or by customs made by men; b) those who articulated their dissent through word and/or deed either individually or collectively; c) those who made use of confrontational and non-confrontational strategies either individually or collectively to improve the disadvantaged status of their sex. I have evolved this definition keeping in view the context of colonialism in which colonial women emerged straddling as they did, the oppressions of sex, race, caste and class.

The feminism represented by Maharashtrian women resembles the feminist activities of early nineteenth century female reform societies of America in so far as their endeavours to foster female consciousness and expression of solidarity and community consciousness are concerned.²² However, the main differences can be identified in the emergence of consciousness among Indian women in survival issues

²⁰Percival Spear, The Oxford history of modern India, 1740-1975, (Oxford, 1978), p.274.

²¹For an exhaustive analysis of the controversy amongst the Western tradition see Karen Offen, 'Defining feminism: A comparative historical approach', Signs, 14:1, Autumn 1988, pp. 119-57. An 'African brand of feminism', has been posited by Filomina Chioma Steady (ed.), Introduction to The Black woman cross culturally, (Cambridge, 1981).

²²See the revisionist approach to the history of feminism in United States as represented by Carroll Smith Rosenberg, Nancy Cott, and Linda Gordon. See in particular Estelle B. Freedman, 'What women wanted: Varieties of feminism in nineteenth century America', Stanford Observer, Jan. 1978, pp.3-7.

and in the use of strategies to create space for themselves.²³ The Indian middle-class was a creation of the nascent capitalist economy and was itself a precarious sector of colonial society. Middle-class women who were the first to articulate and foster feminist consciousness in India expressed it keeping in view the interests of their survival rather than due to an anti-male ideology. Their strategies were geared towards accommodating men in their schemes for women's emancipation rather than alienating them, an approach which represented a survival technique.

The choice of the region, Maharashtra, has been dictated mainly by the comparative lack of a gender history of the region. While Bengali women have been the subject of much research and discussion in the last two decades, and continue to receive considerable attention, the study of Maharashtrian women has been largely neglected. This thesis tries to demonstrate the heterogeneity of women's experiences through different locales, besides helping to question the assumption of concepts of 'purdah' as uniformly common to the whole of India.

Women began to articulate their protest in the context of the socio-religious reform movements which reached their peak in the 1870s and 1880s. This is the main reason for selecting the 1870s as the starting point for the thesis. Social reform movements, however, ebbed and gave way almost entirely to political reform movements by the 1920s. I have chosen the 1920s for the close of the study as the effective leadership of Ramabai Ranade ends with her death and marks the entrance of Gandhi on the nationalist scene, which together brought about a transformation in the way women perceived their struggle, and this would require a separate study in itself.

The nature of the study which locates agency in women has necessitated the use of new methods of inquiry and new ways of looking at known sources. For the perceptions of women I have concentrated basically on Marathi sources as many women wrote in their mother-tongue. These include autobiographies, biographies,

²³Several works on Western women's history have revealed that 'feminist consciousness', emanated through a need to address survival issues too. See Temma Caplan, 'Female consciousness and collective action: The case of Barcelona, 1910-18,' in Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Rosaldo and Barbara Gelpi (eds.), *Feminist theory: A critique of ideology*, (Chicago, 1982), pp.55-76. See also the pioneering interpretation of Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and culture in early modern France*, (Stanford, 1975).

song-books, literature (novels, short stories, plays and tracts) and treatises on philosophical, religious or social questions. Women's journals edited by women and indisputably meant for women readers have been used to gauge the opinions of ordinary women. Letters by women to the editors of women's magazines or for important national and regional newspapers have also proved useful as an index of their awareness and dissent.

Perhaps not surprisingly in a male-dominated society, protest by women against men is barely recorded in historical sources. However, I have tried to construct a picture of resistance by women of all classes by tracing women's petitions to the government or to the judiciary over criminal and civil litigation in courts. Many of the works produced by women are no longer available, yet the proof of their publication, the extent of their circulation and brief summaries of their contents exist in the older catalogues of printed Marathi materials during this period and I have used them as important source-materials in themselves.

For the attitudes of the state and for indigenous male discourse I have consulted the judicial, education and general department records of the Bombay Presidency. In addition, the opinions of leading reformers as reported in special committees on the questions of restitution of conjugal rights and Age of Consent Bill have been helpful in the construction of male discourse. Compilations of the Marathi works of leading Maharashtrian intellectuals and newspapers and journals conducted by them have been found to provide valuable insights.

Finally, it is hoped that this study which focuses on woman-centred issues, but treats them as agents affecting socio-economic and political processes within the society as a whole, will persuade other scholars to see in this work a case for the more integrated approach to the writing of gender history. This would mean that not only is gender history placed in the right perspective, but it will also illumine all aspects of social reality which involve women and men.

CHAPTER I

CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S IDEOLOGY AND WORK

In recent decades nineteenth-century India has been studied by social and cultural historians and identified as an era of momentous socio-religious reform movements. Notable among them were Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian movements which used various forms of religious authority to legitimise their programmes for religious and social change. Whether transitional or acculturative, they are described as addressing themselves to a key issue - namely the position and role of women. Standard social histories treat the subject as an interaction between missionaries, indigenous men and modernising forces within the colonial milieu. The male-centred bias of the historiography on the subject has been responsible for the assumption that women were passive recipients of the social reform movements. By neglecting the central subject of the inquiry - the Indian woman - such studies do not sufficiently help us in understanding the links between social and political history. These works also fail to explain what compelled socio-religious movements to take up the issue of women and why the image of Indian womanhood was constantly being recast during the nineteenth century.¹

In this chapter, the growth in women's consciousness will be studied and it will be shown that their feminist critiques came through an analysis and rejection of the dominant religion of their birth and time - Hinduism. The attempts of female converts from Hinduism to Christianity to negotiate with the changing world around them are also examined. Christian women were pioneers in non-segregated educational schemes, famine and plague relief, providing homes for widows and prostitutes, fund-raising and other organisational activities.

At the outset it may be asked whether it is relevant to study the reflections and activities of several dozen women, for most of the women who are studied here gained national and international recognition for their scholarship, oratory and associational activities. Of much more significance is the fact that by their ideology they influenced

¹In a vast field of literature the most representative are Charles Heimsath, Indian nationalism and Hindu social reform, (Princeton, 1964). A recent study proving the persistence of old stereotypes is Kenneth Jones, Socio-religious reform movements in British India, (Cambridge, 1989).

a far larger number of Maharashtrian women, who were inspired to continue the welfare work for women.² Besides, the more charismatic and controversial among Christian women engaged in a dialogue with the indigenous elites as well as forging a constructive relationship with Hindu women. This chapter has also been prompted by the need to remove misconceptions of some historians of Christianity who maintain that converts to Christianity were mainly recruits from the lowest castes of India and who also presume that female converts were merely following the menfolk of their households.³ Some of the finest feminist critiques written by Indian Christian women were produced by Brahmins - the highest in the caste hierarchy. It will be demonstrated that far from following their menfolk, women exhibited remarkable independence of judgement, whether in resisting or choosing Christianity.

Historical background to the missions

Some of the first missions to India in the 1820s applied themselves rigorously to the education of women. Their programmes rested on the belief that the 'womanhood of India' was 'the protectress and zealous adherent of traditional heathenism'.⁴ Indian grandmothers, mothers and wives were supposed to teach the first lessons of idolatry and ritual to children. Thus, conversions were unlikely unless the influence of women was combated. In the later half of the nineteenth century the complexion of missionary activity changed with the beginnings of the women's movements in Europe and America. Revisionist historians have shown how European and American women in their quest for self-definition and alternative roles began to interest themselves in the

²Pandita Ramabai, at the end of 1900, had 2,000 pupils in four of her institutions and all of them except a handful were converts to Christianity. She also spread her work outside Maharashtra after 1900 by opening branches in Doddaballapur and Gulbarga, now in Karnataka. Soonderbai Powar's school, in any one year in the 1890s had 200 female converts. Franscina Sorabji likewise noted with pride that over 400 students had completed their education in the Victoria High School. Shewantibai Nikambe had 120 girls in the Princess High School, all of whom were high-caste Hindu girls.

³David Edwards, Christian England, Vol.III, (London, 1984), pp.314-45; M.A.Sherring, The history of Protestant missions in India, (London, 1875).

⁴J.Richter, A history of missions in India, (Edinburgh, 1908), p.329.

cause of the 'heathen' woman.⁵ Recently a more sophisticated argument has been drawn by Antoinette Burton, Geraldine Forbes and Barbara Ramusack about the roles of missionary and non-missionary white women's activities in the colonies. They argue that white women who went to colonies in the nineteenth century constructed and relied on the notion of 'enslaved' Indian women which served the purposes of their own programmes of emancipation.⁶ They argue convincingly that, overseas opportunities not only provided space for the surplus 'genteel' population of white women but empowered them through collaboration in the ideological work of empire.

In the 1860s, the first women's auxiliary units of various missions like the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the London Missionary Society began to arrive in India. Between 1858 and 1871, according to Richter, there were 8 women's auxiliary units of Anglican and American missions in India. Such was the enthusiasm among female circles in England that the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society alone sent 214 women between 1887 and 1894.⁷ They brought a new angle to the old missionary enterprise, a concern for the 'desolate plight of Indian womanhood'. Combating sati, infanticide, providing refuge homes for deserted wives and widows, educating women in zenanas -all these appeared prominently on missionary women's agendas. During the nineteenth century missionaries regarded Bombay Presidency, especially Maharashtra, as ideal ground for their conversion programmes. Typical accounts appearing in missionary literature cite the history of the region as one characterised by being less under Muslim influence, with women having greater freedom of movement and the unveiled Maharashtrian women providing fewer obstacles for the work of Western missionary women. By the 1890s the missions of the American Board, the Free Church of Scotland, the Church Missionary Society and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel were firmly

⁵Nancy F.Cott, The bonds of womanhood: 'Woman's sphere' in New England, 1780-1835, (New Haven, 1977), especially Chapter Four.

⁶Amongst others see Antoinette Burton, 'The white woman's burden: British feminists and the Indian woman, 1865-1915', Women's Studies International Forum, 13:4, 1990, pp.295-308; Geraldine Forbes, 'In search of the 'Pure Heathen': Missionary women in nineteenth century India', Economic and Political Weekly, 21:17, 1986, Review of Women's Studies, hereafter (WS), WS:2-9.

⁷Richter, A history of missions, p.342.

established in larger towns like Bombay, Poona, Nasik, Ahmednagar, Belgaum, Kolhapur and were slowly spreading into smaller towns and villages. Together, they boasted a 'native Christian' population of approximately 60,000.⁸

Some of the first male converts were from influential Parsi and Brahmin families in Bombay and Ahmednagar. As early as the 1820s, missions from the Scottish Board and the Church Missionary Society had established roots in Bombay and were highly successful in maintaining high schools while the American Board prospered at Ahmednagar. Members of indigenous elites aspiring to a professional education for their children in the 1820s and 1830s had no choice but to send their boys to Mission schools. Undoubtedly, the first converts were products of schools run by missionaries. It may be noted here that the earliest missionaries who came to work in India were considered by converts as sincere, kind, highly learned, and of a liberal mind - unlike the missionaries of the late nineteenth century who are recalled in disparaging terms by female converts.⁹ Not surprisingly, the first female converts were the wives, mothers or sisters of the first Brahmin, Muslim or Parsi converts.

It is relevant to analyse the conversion of the first Maharashtrian male enthusiasts in order to compare and contrast them with the female converts. The emerging Indian intelligentsia in the early half of the nineteenth century was faced with an eclectic culture. On the one hand it was marked by missionary activity, and on the other by the reforming zeal of influential Brahmins who criticised the contemporary state of Hindu society and the practices of a corrupt Brahmin priesthood. Secret societies like the Paramahansa Mandali flourished alongside open societies like the Dnyan Prasarak Mandali, the vernacular press was flooded with newspapers like the Prabhakar which regularly exposed Hinduism. Meanwhile, missionaries went on their daily rounds of public preaching in busy market places and engaged in formal discussions with learned Hindus. Baba Padmanji recorded how he benefited from this eclectic atmosphere:

⁸Samuel Sathianadhan, Sketches of Indian Christians collected from different sources, (London, 1896), pp.188-89.

⁹Narayan Sheshadri, Dhanjibhai Nauroji, Baba Padmanji and Kharsedji Sorabji, as the first batch of converts who impressed the Maharashtrian milieu of the time, mention the influence of their teachers with a respect bordering on reverence. Some of the well-known missionaries of the time were John Wilson, George Valentine, Robert Nesbit and Murray Mitchell.

The Dnaynodaya convinced me of the truth of Christianity and the futility of the claims of the Shastras [Hindu religious books] to divine inspiration; the Prabhakar destroyed my religious reverence for the Brahmans; and the Dnyan Prakash had preserved me from falling into the quagmire of atheism.¹⁰

In a manner similar to Baba Padmanji most of the male converts arrived at an acceptance of Christianity after an intellectual tussle with the religious precepts of Hinduism and Christianity. They exhibited a formidable knowledge of the scriptures of the respective religions.¹¹ In short, to male converts it was an intellectual exercise borne out of a major questioning on abstract theological issues whether it was in relation to questions of 'revealed' religion or on the inconsistencies of the shastras. The women's question as treated in different religions was not cited as a reason for conversion amongst men. Though Baba Padmanji expressed concern at the suffering of Hindu widows in his work, just as missionary tracts did, yet the place of women in relation to various religions was not a major point for conversion.¹² This was despite the fact that position of women in different religions was taken up as a bone of contention by many Hindus, as seen in the great number of tracts of the period which deal with the question of the salvation of Hindu women.¹³

This brings us to the question why women were prompted to change religions. Were they prompted, like male converts, by intellectual abstractions? If they were not, then what was the difference between their conversion and that of men? For a more detailed discussion, I shall analyse the views of three female converts of the period -

¹⁰Baba Padmanji, Once Hindu, now Christian: The early life of Baba Padmanji, An autobiography, J.Murray Mitchell (tr.), (London, 1890), p.71.

¹¹Nilakantha Goreh for example was a Brahmin priest who had begun by refuting Christian doctrines and ended as a staunch Christian. He wrote learned treatises exposing Hindu philosophy. See Nehemiah Nilakantha Sastri Goreh, A rational refutation of the Hindu philosophical systems, Fitz-Edward Hall (tr.), (Calcutta, 1862).

¹²After his conversion, Baba Padmanji wrote a novel Yamuna Paryatan (Yamuna's rambles), (Marathi), (Bombay, 1937), in which he highlighted the Hindu widow's problems through the trials of the heroine Yamuna.

¹³For a sample of this literature, see Bhagwant Hari Khare, How is woman treated by man and religion?, (Bombay, 1895); Dewan Bahadur Raghunatha Row, Women's right to salvation, (Madras, 1887).

Pandita Ramabai, Krupabai and Soonderbai Powar before moving on to women who chose to be Christians and who were not grounded in theology or could not even claim an elementary education.

Reconstituting Indian womanhood: Critique of Hinduism

The earliest signs of consciousness of female identity among Maharashtrian women were recognisable in their evaluation of the position of women in various religions and their acceptance or rejection of it. One of the most vociferous sections of Maharashtrian feminists were converts from Hinduism. Why were women belonging to Hindu orthodoxy attracted to Christianity? It is important to pose this question because, in addition to Pandita Ramabai, a host of lesser and relatively unknown women converted of their own volition. It may be argued that, apart from Pandita Ramabai, such women were merely following the dictates of their husbands. However, this particular category of women showed great resistance to conversion and carried on resisting it for upto a decade. Their resistance, and the reasons for their eventual acceptance, also demonstrates the common bonding among women in their reasoning and interaction with the world around them.

Even among those women who followed their husbands a certain prioritisation of desires is evident. Wives of male converts generally had the choice of living with their parents or their extended family. Moreover, they had heard of the great persecution converts were subjected to by Hindus, yet they chose to follow their husbands. In fact, quite a few of them had dramatic escapes from their enraged kith and kin. For example, Ganderbai Powar told the court that she had been imprisoned in her own home and prevented from joining her husband for years.¹⁴ Not all women were successful in resolving conflicts over religious issues and quite a few cases ended tragically. Lakshmibai underwent a severe introspection within herself and remained with her parental family but after seven years wanted to re-join her husband and found that he had given up on her and re-married. She died a year later.¹⁵

¹⁴See Helen S.Dyer's Preface to Soonderbai Powar, Hinduism and womanhood, (London, n.d.), p.6.

¹⁵Baba Padmanji, Once a Hindu, p.136.

Anandibai Bhagat who accompanied Pandita Ramabai on her trip to Wantage, England in 1882, committed suicide.¹⁶ Although, in her case the anxieties of conversion was accompanied by the tensions brought on by her interaction with missionaries.¹⁷ In order to get a complete picture of the conflicts, ambivalences and resolutions of women's struggle to create a social space for themselves we have to look at their process of discovering Christianity.

As a first-generation convert, Pandita Ramabai's views are significant - she provides a key to the growing feminist consciousness of women on an unprecedented scale in Maharashtra.¹⁸ In her earliest analysis of Hinduism's treatment of women, written for the Cheltenham Ladies College Magazine in 1885, she argued that the

¹⁶Anandibai's letter to the Head of the Mission school in Bombay reveal her unhappiness and fear of having displeased her patron, Mrs. Mitchell. Her undated letter was written in 1883 during her stay with the Community of St. Mary the Virgin at Wantage in England. In A.B. Shah., (ed.), The letters and correspondence of Pandita Ramabai, (Bombay, 1977), pp.11-4.

¹⁷Anandibai's case is similar to the traumatic experiences of Lily Moya in apartheid Africa. See Shula Marks, (ed.), 'Not either an experimental doll': The separate worlds of three South African women, (Bloomington, 1987).

¹⁸**Pandita Ramabai:(1858-1922)** Born in a Chitpawan Brahmin family of Mangalore district, Karnataka. Ananta Shastri Dongre, her father taught at the Peshwa's court where he was impressed by the Sanskrit knowledge of the Peshwa's wife. He taught his wife Lakshmibai who learned rapidly and she in turn taught Ramabai. In 1875 Ramabai accompanied her parents on their wanderings round India. Her parents died in Raichur in the famine of 1877 in great poverty and suffering. Ramabai was a child prodigy. At the age of twelve she had committed to memory 12,000 verses of the ancient Sanskrit scriptures. Along with her brother Srinivas, she travelled all over north India and when she was twenty she reached Calcutta. Here she was drawn into the reform circles and in an open competition with male pandits she was able to impress the audience enough to win the title of 'Pandita Saraswati'. In 1879 she married a non-brahmin Bengali Bipin Behari Medhavi, and lived in Silchar (Assam) for nineteen months where her daughter Manoramabai was born. In 1880, her husband died in a cholera epidemic and she went back to Bombay. At twenty-two, she was fluent in Marathi, Kannada, Hindi, Bengali as well as Sanskrit. Later on she mastered Greek, Latin and Hebrew. In 1882, she learned English with Ramabai Ranade in Poona and amalgamated her Ladies Association with other women's groups under the name of Arya Mahila Samaj. Her first book in Marathi, Stridharma niti (Prescribed laws and duties on the proper conduct of women) earned her funds to travel to England. In England she stayed with the Wantage Sisters and learned Christian theology, and converted in 1883. For a while she held the Chair of Sanskrit at the prestigious Cheltenham Ladies College. Between 1885 and 1887, she travelled in America and studied the kindergarten system of education. Meanwhile, her vision for liberating Indian women had crystallised and she lectured extensively on the pitiable condition of Indian women and the need to emancipate them. Her next book in English, The high-caste Hindu woman, a powerful feminist tract caught the imagination of the American public from Quakers to Evangelicals who formed 65 'Ramabai circles' and pledged to make her projects successful. The circles were coordinated under an elected Board called The American Ramabai Association. Pandita Ramabai was awarded the Kaisar-i-Hind medal by the Indian government in recognition of her services to Indian women. She died in 1922.

Hindu religion advocates a personal religion for man wherein he has special privileges and duties. But a woman has no such special favours marked out for her. Her religion was to worship her husband and please him. It was only through her husband that she could secure a place in heaven. The fact that there was no 'personal responsibility' to God created dissatisfaction within Pandita Ramabai.¹⁹

She quoted Manu's Code to show how a Hindu wife is supposed to obey and worship her husband as a God, even when he was alcoholic and licentious. By removing 'personal responsibility' to God, Ramabai argued that there was nothing to sustain a wife if ~~un~~unlucky enough to be married to an unworthy husband and was robbed of the personal dignity which a Christian woman could claim. Hindu women, she reflected, could not reach the 'true dignity of womanhood', as Hinduism did not respect women as independent human beings and women themselves imbibed the Hindu notion of duty and worship of one's husband and tried to please him in any way, irrespective of ethical values. There was no religious motive for Hindu women to engage in self-sacrifice as there was no higher ideal than serving the husband and his family. Therefore, even though women spent their entire lives in a spirit of selflessness they actually gained nothing in spiritual terms.

? she was

The fact that Hindu women were as pious as men, if not more so, led her to investigate the manner in which the unjust treatment of the sexes evolved in the practice of Hinduism. She reasoned:

I doubt whether charitable institutions could go on at all were it not for women. In our country when women go to hear a Purana [religious legend] or to worship God in a temple, they never go empty-handed. They must place before the Puranika [Hindu scripture reader] some gift, money, it may be, or a fruit or a flower, or, at very least a handful of rice. And yet, in spite of that, Hinduism declares that women are compounded of every evil thing in the universe...²⁰

Her sense of acute disappointment with Hinduism over the unequal position accorded

¹⁹Pandita Ramabai, 'Account of the life of a hindoo woman', Cheltenham Ladies College Magazine, No.12, Autumn 1885, p.143, Institutional Collection of Mukti Mission, hereafter (ICMM).

²⁰Cited in Nicol MacNicol, Pandita Ramabai, (Calcutta, 1926), p.72.

to women is recorded in A Testimony, an autobiographical work. She found a common strand linking all the Sanskrit texts of the Mahabharata, Dharma Shastras, Vedas, Smritis, and the Puranas to the modern poets and popular preachers of the day and that was that:

Women of high and low caste, as a class, were bad, very bad, worse than demons, as unholy as untruth, and that they could not get Moksha as men. The only hope of their getting this much-desired liberation from Karma and its results, viz., countless millions of births and deaths and untold suffering, was the worship of their husbands. The woman has no right to study the Vedas and Vedanta and without knowing Brahma no one can get liberation, i.e., Moksha... My eyes were being gradually opened, and I was waking up to my own hopeless condition as a woman, and it was becoming clearer and clearer to me that I had no place anywhere as far as religious consolation was concerned. I became quite dissatisfied with myself, I wanted something more than the Shastras could give me...²¹

For the first time she rebelled against Hindu injunctions and read the forbidden books, the Vedas, but her discontent was even greater than when she began her investigation. She lost all faith in the Hindu religion and carried out another act of rebellion by marrying a Bengali of Shudra caste. However, it was only in 1883 when she went to England and saw the work of the Wantage Sisters that her interest in Christian doctrine was awakened.

Protestantism in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth- century England and America had become a matter of the heart rather than the head. In the words of Barbara Welter, a certain 'feminisation' of religion had begun and the clergy built a rationale for the special obligations of women to religion by emphasising Biblical women other than Eve and by identifying traditional religious values with that of 'feminine' values of humility, kindness and meekness.²² It was a powerful rhetoric

²¹Pandita Ramabai, A testimony, (Kedgaon, 6th ed., 1964), 1st ed., 1907, p.8.

²²Women's effective entry in the public arena via social offices of churches, like Sunday school teaching, working in missions and distributing tracts took place during the great revivals of this period. For a study of American women's entry see Barbara Welter, 'The feminization of American religion, 1800-1860', in Mary Hartman and Lois Banner (eds.), Clio's consciousness raised: New perspectives on the history of women, (New York, 1974), pp.137-57, and for England see Leonore

which influenced British and especially American women to take immense interest in their 'sisters' overseas. Indian Christian women who had close contacts with Western missionary women also came under this influence and began to adopt Christianity as a positive organising principle of their lives. Most of the Indian Christian women who form the subject of this study benefited from Western missionaries and acknowledged it too. Pandita Ramabai acknowledged the Wantage Sisters of Fulham, through whom she realised for the first time that 'fallen women' (prostitutes) could be brought back into society. She contrasted their work with the Hindu practice of shunning prostitutes as the greatest of all sinners and unworthy of compassion. She asked the Sisters why they cared for prostitutes and thus learned from them about Christ's meeting with the Samaritan woman and his teachings on the nature of true worship which excluded neither male nor female. It was then that she realised that 'there was a real difference between Hinduism and Christianity', and was convinced that Christ alone 'could transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of India and every land.'²³ After the transformation of her ideas, Pandita translated it into action by founding the Kripa Sadan (Home of Mercy) probably the first home for the rehabilitation of prostitutes in India.

Pandita Ramabai was baptised in 1883 along with her daughter Manoramabai, and she records that finally she felt at peace with herself, having found a 'religion which gave privileges equally to men and women; and where there was no distinction of caste, colour or sex in it'.²⁴ Her rebellion, then, was against a religion that preached inequality, which counterposed good and evil respectively in men and women. She rejected the Vedantic teachings about the 'unreality' (illusion) of life and showed a preference for a religion which conceived of human life as 'reality' because this philosophy opened a life of possibilities, of a life to be lived intensely and with a purpose.

In a similar manner to Pandita Ramabai, a few other Hindu women who were

Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850, (London, 1987).

²³Pandita Ramabai, A short history of the Kripa Sadan, or Home of Mercy (Kedgaon, 1964), 1st ed., 1908, p.2.

²⁴Pandita Ramabai, A testimony, p.13.

allowed by liberal parents to seek education in mission schools arrived at accepting Christianity through a learning process. An interesting instance was Gunabai, who studied in a mission school in Ahmednagar where she was impressed by the 'Christian values' of compassion and mercy. Her daughter Shewatibai recollected that John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress had such an impact on her that she lost all traces of hesitancy and reserve about the wrath of her community and ran away to the mission house never to return to her parents.²⁵ The impact of Christianity through missionary discourse had a profound effect on the perceptions of a certain small but influential section of literate Maharashtrian women. So far we have discussed the growth of consciousness among women with a fairly advanced education grounded in Christian and Hindu theology. We will now turn to illiterate women and the influences that changed their lives.

The 'God of widows and deserted wives':²⁶ Illiterate women and Christianity

Turning to the category of illiterate and semi-literate women it is appropriate to ask the question - what propelled them towards Christianity? It is not suggested here that this category of women was incapable of theorising but that they were guided more by social considerations. A large number of semi-literate women converted to Christianity during this period, notably in Sharada Sadan, the largest school in India for Brahmin widows. In 1892, twelve out of forty-nine widows and thirteen non-widows in Sharada Sadan converted to Christianity. Interestingly, all of them were adult Brahmin women and faced the possibility of ill-treatment (as a result of their conversion) from their relatives and/or guardians. Why, then, did they convert? In 1899, only 8 out of 108 remained Hindus while Pandita Ramabai claimed in 1905 (the year she publicly dropped secular teaching) that 1,500 out of 2,000 pupils in her

²⁵Recollections of Shewatibai, Mistress of Epiphany School, Poona, on her mother's conversion. In Magazine of Panch Howd, St. Mary Convent, (Poona, 1892). n.p, (ICMM).

²⁶This phrase was used by illiterate and semi-literate women in Sharada Sadan to describe what Christ meant to them. 'The story of Jivi and others', (typed manuscript), pp.1-15, (ICMM).

schools were Christians.²⁷

It is unlikely that she had any direct influence on the girls due to the highly structured organisational and managerial aspects of her schools. The Executive Committee of the American Ramabai Association had drawn up the constitution of the school as a 'secular' institution. It made it explicit to Pandita Ramabai that if they had any cause for dissatisfaction, the funding of her school would stop as it was being supported by an annual grant of about \$10,000 drawn from an eclectic American public covering all Christian sects and denominations on the specific understanding that the school would be non-sectarian. Also significant was the appointment of a Managing Committee by the American Ramabai Association consisting of six Indian members. Among them were M.G.Ranade, R.G.Bhandarkar, Atmaram Pandurang and C.N.Bhat - well-known reformers of Maharashtra. The rules laid down by this committee contrived to turn the school from 'secular' to 'Hindu'. Pandita Ramabai clashed with the committee because she refused their request to make worship, prayer, fasting and other symbolic practices of widowhood compulsory and instead gave the students the choice. However, they eventually came to a compromise whereby Ramabai was debarred from entering the kitchen, dining area, and rooms of strict Hindu girls. Under such strict surveillance, the only place where she could interact with students was in the lecture rooms.²⁸ The tumult that arose in the indigenous society was not caused so much by the fear of conversion as much as it was by the educational politics of the period. The fate of the newly opened Poona Girls' High School, the founders of which were some of the members of the Managing Committee of Sharada Sadan, too had a stake in the efficient running of the Girls' School. In the

²⁷A huge uproar took place in Maharashtra among Hindus over the issue of conversions in Pandita's schools. Most of the turmoil took the form of rumours and allegations regarding her supposedly pernicious influence over her students. The vernacular press active in denouncing her was chiefly led by B.G. Tilak's newspaper, Kesari. It was a harrowing time for her as she was not only accused of dishonesty and disloyalty but received death-threats as well and had to watch her life's work being torn apart by Hindus.

²⁸It is therefore hardly possible to see any direct coercion by her of the students. Disturbed by the furore caused over the conversions, the American Ramabai Association sent their President Mrs. Andrews to investigate the matter in 1893. After a fact-finding tour lasting six months, she submitted an extensive report describing the allegations against Ramabai as 'baseless fabrications'. Ramabai, however, admitted that she may have had an indirect influence on the girls through her lifestyle. See Annual Report of American Ramabai Association, 11 Mar. 1894, pp.16-19, (ICMM).

1890s the Government had threatened to withdraw aid to this school if the number of high-caste girls did not show an appreciable increase. Not surprisingly, 12 out of 31 girls withdrawn from Pandita Ramabai's institution were placed in the school run by male reformers.²⁹

We are able to construct a picture of the views and feelings of the converts on the basis of the exhaustive personal interviews by Judith Andrews, Chairman of the American Ramabai Association with pupils of Sharada Sadan.³⁰ Many of the Brahmin widows who converted to Christianity revealed that on their entry into Sharada Sadan they were not compelled to fast or shave their heads. They were also informed in the classrooms that the spirit of their dead husbands was not linked to the hair on their head and for the first time they read about a God who did not believe in persecuting them for their lapses in good behaviour. They did not experience the concepts of pollution of touch and sight associated with widows in Sharada Sadan. Further, some of them admitted that they felt the joy of living and of being treated like other human-beings only after entering Ramabai's school. They attributed their misery to Hindu religious customs and eventually, in a somewhat simplistic manner, accepted Christianity, wherein they felt they could escape some of the hardships of Hindu strictures on the conduct of widows.³¹

One of Sharada Sadan's exceptional students, Nurmadabai, who was removed from the school after the first uproar over the conversion issue in 1893, corroborated the reason for the many conversions. She had attended Sunday school since the age of seven and at the age of ten she was admitted to the Sharada Sadan. It was in this school that she felt for the first time that there was 'something real about this religion' (meaning Christianity). She said that neither Ramabai nor the other teachers had pressured her into baptism. Instead she spoke of the motherliness and kindness

²⁹For details of the founding of this school by male enterprise see Chapter Six.

³⁰Guardians were also requested to send their opinions. D.K.Karve, an important Hindu social reformer who married Sharada Sadan's first pupil reported that in her four-year training at the school Godubai, had besides acquiring an 'enlarged and enlightened mind', also became 'free from many of our degrading superstitions'. D.K.Karve to Mrs.Andrews, 2 Feb. 1894, Annual Report of The American Ramabai Association, 1894, pp.27-29, (ICMM).

³¹Annual Report of The American Ramabai Association, 11 Mar. 1894, pp.12-25, (ICMM).

prevalent in the school atmosphere that had prompted her to change religion. She admitted to Judith Andrews that a large number of girls had previously experienced no happiness in their own homes but in Sharada Sadan instead of abuse, they were given affection and kindness.³²

Part of the explanation for the voluntary acts of conversion can be surmised from Pandita Ramabai's method of instruction. As early as 1886, she had mused that Manu's Code of Law and the earliest Hindu scriptures ought to form part of the syllabus in girls' schools in order to make them realise their true position in Hindu religion and society.³³ Certainly the Puranas were taught in her school.³⁴ It is possible that women were encouraged to think on these issues as a result of this teaching. Besides, to many illiterate widows who came from extremely oppressive families, Christ was represented as a saviour of deserted wives, prostitutes and widows.³⁵ Such a notion had a tremendous appeal to harassed and tormented women.

The statistics available for the Mukti Mission schools show that two-thirds of the pupils were widows. A significant proportion of the widows who were not bound by any kinship ties or guardians were quick in seeing the advantages of freeing themselves from caste restrictions like cooking food prepared by their own hands. In 1896 only a handful of women in the Sharada Sadan remained Hindus and they had admitted to Pandita Ramabai that they were Hindus only because they were bound to powerful relatives.³⁶ Ramabai herself was constantly surprised by the behaviour of orthodox Hindu girls, who, a few days after their arrival thought of breaking caste rules. It seemed rational that Hindu women, compelled to fast and shave their heads

³²In 1893, when Nurmabai was removed from Sharada Sadan she refused to go to any other school and after two years seeing her obstinacy and determination to study in no other school other than Pandita's she was re-admitted. See Address of Nurmabai at the annual meeting of the American Ramabai Association, In Annual Report of American Ramabai Association, 1903, pp.40-42, (ICMM).

³³Pandita Ramabai, 'Account of the life of a Hindoo woman', Cheltenham Ladies College Magazine, no.22, Autumn 1885, p.146, (ICMM).

³⁴Mukti Prayer Bell (Magazine of Mukti Mission), Dec. 1904 and Oct. 1905, (ICMM).

³⁵'The story of Jivi and others', pp.1-15.

³⁶Pandita Ramabai to Dr.Donald, President of American Ramabai Association, 13 Sept. 1902, p.6, (ICMM).

and perform endless rituals in their own homes, freed of that compulsion, were able to quickly rekindle their aspirations and needs.'

A third and final category of women converts were wives of men. They were drawn from diverse castes, such as tanners, carpenters and masons. None of them was motivated by theological questions but by issues of personal morality. They initially followed their husbands and agreed to live with them in the belief that a Hindu wife's duty was serving her husband. Yet they opposed the actions of their husbands and expressed disapproval by keeping a separate house, serving separate meals to their husbands and continuing Hindu rituals for several years. The reasons they gave for conversion are based on the transformation they saw and experienced in their menfolk's attitude and conduct towards them.

Ganderbai Powar, for example, narrated that when her husband was a Hindu, he was hot-tempered, petulant and harsh to her but he was 'all kindness' after he became a Christian.³⁷ Similarly Radhabai Khisti noted the change for the better in her husband after he became a Christian.³⁸ Women like Sakubai argued that Christianity must be a superior religion because in spite of her refusal to live with her husband for two whole years he had not re-married!³⁹

The appeal of an alien religion was quite differently perceived and experienced by men and women. It is useful to contrast the attitude of women to that of Christian men who used the same argument of 'personal morality' in different ways. A well-known Maharashtrian Christian of the late nineteenth century Nehemiah Goreh, argued with the Brahmos and Prarthana Samajists that the monotheist god in Hinduism as described in the best texts of Hindus - the Vedas and Upanishads - combined sublime attributes of what a God ought to be, yet this God had no sense of morality and could not distinguish right from wrong. The Hindu God, according to him was immoral and adulterous. Therefore, he argued, how can one worship God, if he claims to be

³⁷Kate Storrie, Soonderbai Powar: A noble worker for Indian womanhood, (London, n.d.), pp.6-7.

³⁸S.Sathianadhan, Sketches of Indian Christians, pp.190-94.

³⁹A short account of her work is in the Magazine of Panch Howd, 1884, p.7, (ICMM).

immortal and is full of mortal failings?⁴⁰ Issues of morality are not considered by Goreh from a subjective point of view but as an abstraction. Women, however, arrived at the same conclusion regarding the purer spirit of Christianity but from a subjective viewpoint rather than from a philosophical exposition.

In the transition from disapproval to acceptance of Christianity none among the above category of women displayed a knowledge of the theological constructs of either religions. But, after their baptism, they were given basic training in Christian doctrines. They proved to be some of the finest workers in the proselytisation programmes of the missionaries. As Bible-women and catechists, they were able to relay religious precepts in a simple manner to villagers. Soonderbai Powar reported the tremendous success of some of her Bible-women. Dhanwantibai, whom she watched in action used to take metal images of Vishnu or Ganapati and wash it in front of villagers telling them that if the God cant wash himself how could he look after or cleanse her sins.⁴¹ Religion, as we have seen, was experienced in a different way by women than men. The choice of a new religion was a liberating experience for them. It imbued them with a new sense of identity while providing them with a new ideal of dignity and self-respect.

We may pause here to consider the critiques of second generation Christian women in order to assess how far the critiques thrown up by Pandita Ramabai were continued, added to or improvised by them.

Second generation women: Extension of the feminist critiques of religion

Second generation Christian women were much more systematic in their analysis by addressing the male sex as the original culprit in the vilification of women through their coding and encoding of the Hindu religion. Reminiscent of the French 'Querelle des Femme' which raged between fifteenth and eighteenth centuries in France, these

⁴⁰Nehemiah Goreh, Four lectures delivered in substance to the brahmos in Bombay and Poona, (Bombay, 1875), pp.1-11.

⁴¹Cited in Kate Storrie, Soonderbai Powar, pp.100-01.

women singled out Hindu men as misogynists.⁴²

Like Pandita Ramabai, Soonderbai Powar also located women's servitude in Hindu religion and social customs but she elaborated on Pandita's critique by implicating the role of men with much greater clarity.⁴³ She described Indian women as 'slaves' who had been forced to merge their personal freedom and individuality in the personality of man. Through an acute observation of Hindu mannerisms, the expressions used on the birth of a female child, the popular sayings about wives and widows, the offensive language used against women, she demonstrates how a woman is devalued, making it impossible for her to be an inspiring companion to her husband or a wise and responsible mother to her children.⁴⁴ Weaving a narrative through the life-histories of the students in her Zenana Teacher's Training School, she concluded that, if Hindu women were in 'bondage', it was one imposed by selfish men through the rules of a religion which made them perceive woman 'as nothing more than a soulless animal to be used for the pleasure of man'.⁴⁵

⁴²French women's counter-attack on male misogynists regarding woman's nature has been analysed by Joan Kelly, 'Early feminist theory and the querelle des femme, 1400-1789', *Signs*, 8:1, 1982, pp.4-28.

⁴³**Soonderbai Powar:1856-1921** She was the daughter of Ramachandra and Ganderbai who were first generation Christians who originally came from wealthy high-caste families. She travelled widely throughout Maharashtra with her parents when they were posted to different mission stations. As a child she accompanied her parents in preaching the Gospel and learned a great deal about popular Hinduism. Upto the age of twelve she was taught at home by her father and a Sanskrit tutor. At the age of fourteen she taught English to the Brahmin wife of the Deputy Collector of Sasvad. She soon expressed a desire to be a zenana teacher and so her parents sent her to Bombay to acquire the necessary education. For several years she dabbled in nursing and teaching but did not enjoy the work and went back to zenana teaching. She differed radically from Western missionaries in her methods of instruction. The first booklet written by her was to encourage disheartened missionaries about Gospel work entitled 'Is Zenana work a failure?'. She was well-known in Britain for her anti-opium crusade. In 1883 she came in contact with Pandita Ramabai and was so impressed by her learning and courage that when Ramabai left Bombay along with the Sharada Sadan, Soonderbai left her zenana work and accompanied her. For seven years she worked as Ramabai's 'right-hand' and once she felt that the institutions of Mukti were stable she left to follow her own heart's work namely the opening of a Zenana Training Teacher's School in Poona. This school flourished on funds she had secured by her travels in England, Scotland and Ireland. She wrote many tracts of which, the book Hinduism and Womanhood most clearly expressed her views on women's issues.

⁴⁴Soonderbai Powar, Hinduism and womanhood, (London, n.d.). An earlier version of the book was published by her probably in early 1890s under the title The bitter fruits of Hinduism, (details unknown).

⁴⁵Ibid., p.31.

Dissecting Hindu customs like early marriage, female infanticide, the zenana system, the dedication of girls as temple prostitutes and the buying and selling of wives, she called them the 'bitter fruits of Hinduism', because

in the name of their religion, Hindus do many wicked things and have many bad customs which cruelly limit or destroy the liberty of the subject, and strangle social and family happiness.⁴⁶

According to Soonderbai, such customs derived sanction from the inviolable principles of their religion and philosophy and Hindu men would do nothing to alter them because they had themselves created them. Therefore, she felt that only the Christian religion could free women from such bondage since Hinduism was based on inequality and injustice between the sexes.

However, it was Krupabai, another second generation Christian woman, who vastly improved on earlier critiques by not only investigating Hindu men's resistance to granting equal rights to women but also by showing how Hinduism negatively affected the attitudes and stunted the personalities of Hindu women.⁴⁷ Her critique of the nature of women's oppression in Hindu society and her arguments for the education of women helped women not only to counteract the onslaught of Hindu vilification and contempt of women but, in a larger sense, to help women break

⁴⁶Ibid., p.18.

⁴⁷**Krupabai: (1862-93)** She was born at Ahmednagar on 14 Feb. 1862. Her parents Haripant Khisty and Radhabai were among the earliest Brahmin converts in the Bombay Presidency. Her father died early and she was brought up by her mother, a Bible-woman and was educated at home with her brothers. When she was 12 years old, she was sent to an American mission school in Bombay where it was soon found that she was far ahead of the highest class. Noting her precocious intellect, the missionaries offered her the option of enrolling as a teacher or studying further. By then Krupabai had already made up her mind to be a doctor so she was sent to the Madras Medical College, which had opened its doors to women, where she topped the class in the first year. In the second year Krupabai's health started to fail and she was forced to discontinue her studies. She married S.Sathianadhan, a Cambridge-returned Indian Christian. She died at the early age of 31. In her own time, she was widely known and had a national and international audience for her writings. A prolific writer, her known writings are around twenty essays, two full-length novels and innumerable poems. She was hailed as India's first female novelist and poetess. Her novels are compared to Jane Austen due to her eye for detail, satiric tones, and for exposing domestic hypocrisies of the time. Of interest here are her feminist critiques, exposition of white racism and missionary stupidities and her criticisms of the English-educated Indian middle classes.

through the rigidity of the roles prescribed for them.⁴⁸ In the first instance, marriage, according to her, was not the only goal of a woman's life. Secondly, education, she argued, led women to develop a certain amount of freedom in thinking and action, whereby they would begin to question the social tyranny and injustice they were subjected to, and, as a consequence of this, they could become self-reliant. Thirdly, she argued that this process of women's self-realisation was the only way for the Indian nation to progress.

Krupabai began her analysis with the general proposition that the independence of women was anathema to a Hindu male. A Hindu man could not bear the idea of a clever wife. Because of the high status that a man commanded in Hindu society, the minute a male child is born he is treated like a king. As a result of this he grew up to be a 'petted, spoiled despot, or a selfish ease-loving lord'.⁴⁹ And to his 'inflated, self-satisfied nature', the very idea of an intellectual wife, in any way superior to him 'will be gall-wormwood', - qualities that he lacked and would not tolerate if his wife possessed them.⁵⁰ The second rationale she outlined is a psychological one. Hindus, argued Krupabai, lost their power as rulers and were in servitude for centuries, and, therefore, exercising authority at home was an important compensation for the Hindu male which he would never let go unless women themselves rebelled. The third reason she ascribed to the economic necessity of exploiting the labour services of women for the efficient functioning of Hindu joint families. Thus, she concluded, that if the Hindu religion advocated an inferior status and rights for women it was with the willing connivance of Hindu men.

The critiques of second generation Christian women were closely linked to contemporary male discourse on female education. One of the commonest allegations of the reformers was that women were the greatest opponents of education: they preferred ignorance; their interests could never rise above petty gossip and trifles; they

⁴⁸Krupabai develops these themes in four consequent essays: 'Woman's influence at home', 'Home training of children', 'Female education' and 'Hindu social customs', in Miscellaneous writings of Krupabai Sathianadhan, (Madras, 1896), pp.1-33.

⁴⁹Krupabai, 'Female education', in Miscellaneous writings, p.18.

⁵⁰Ibid., p.19.

blocked reform work.⁵¹ Women inverted these arguments by tracing intrigues and gossip among women to be the consequence of the machinations of Hindu males. Krupabai agreed that women resorted to the pernicious habit of gossiping about their neighbours and quarrelling among themselves, but this situation she said was created by the selfishness of educated men:

How few of our educated men ever trouble themselves about their women - as to how they spend the whole day, whether or not they find the hours hanging on their hands, whether the leading of an idle existence is hateful to them or not! They only look upon the women as mere appendices to their great selves... They [women] are not to be blamed; they know of no higher mode of existence: there is nothing to occupy their minds; no interest is taken in them: they are treated as toys and play-things, and are humoured and pleased with gilded trinkets or any such trifles.⁵²

What we observe here is a rigorous contesting of the knowledge about women claimed by men. Second generation women gave a cultural explanation for Hindu women's inferior status rather than rooting it in a biological theory of the weakness of the 'gentle sex'. If Hindu women were ignorant and bigoted, the reasons were external to them. Krupabai's analysis of the attitudes of Hindu men and the atmosphere in Hindu homes eventually led her to argue that it was only by changing to Christianity that women could redeem themselves.

Krupabai set up a model of independent/dependent women and opposed it with another binary pairing of Christianity/Hinduism. Her message can best be read by comparing the two novels she wrote in the 1890s under the titles, Kamala: A story of Hindu life and Saguna: A story of native Christian life. Kamala's life is described as 'dark' and a prolonged sadness permeates it. Kamala is a young, beautiful and sensitive girl who is brought up in isolation by her father, a Brahmin pandit who has chosen to be a recluse. She grows up consequently in wild mountainous country described as Sivaganga in Nasik district. Krupabai, successfully captured the

⁵¹The opinions of influential Hindu reformers was recorded by Cornelia Sorabji in 'Social relations - England and India', Pan-Anglican Papers, (London, 1908), pp.1-4, (ICMM).

⁵²Krupabai, Miscellaneous writings, p.21.

atmosphere of everyday Maharashtrian life, from the vegetable vendor selling his 'bhaji' to the minute details of a Maharashtrian wedding. We get a feeling of the strict atmosphere of a Hindu home, as when Kamala and her friends in utter simplicity and naivete bathe their idols, fast and make vows in front of various deities in the hope of future happiness with their husband's family. Kamala is married early to an English-educated man called Ganesh. The couple's love-life is fractured by the machinations of a jealous mother-in-law and scheming sisters-in-law, a common plot of novels during this period of social reform.

Ganesh comes under the influence of Sai, a profligate though accomplished woman, who is described as one 'attached to a dramatic company', probably an actress, which had terrible connotations during the nineteenth century. Ganesh spends less and less time with his wife who is ill-treated by her in-laws. Eventually, Ganesh dies of cholera and Kamala gives birth to a child which also succumbs to a fever. Distraught, Kamala rejects her only choice of happiness, the proposal of her childhood betrothed, Ramachander Row, who is willing to marry her despite her being a widow. However, in the end, when Kamala rejects his offer, the author literally interjects in the first person to announce that 'Her religion, crude as it was, had its victory.'⁵³

Through the narrative of the novel, we know the origins of Kamala's convictions. We are told that 'somehow Kamala became resigned to her lot, and it was her crude, religious convictions that enable her to do so'.⁵⁴ Kamala had learned from her father that whether she was good or bad, whether she enjoyed pleasure or suffered pain, she ought not to grumble but accept it meekly, 'for it was her fate'. Caught in a turmoil between her heart, which wished to follow Ramchander, and her mind which enjoined the duty of a faithful wife, Kamala reasoned that if women like Sita and Savitri could not get their due in this world and had to submit to fate, then how could an ordinary mortal like her protest against it? Krupabai argued that Hindu teachings give women very little consolation even as they teach them to be resigned to their fate through passive role-models like Sita. It made them listless, 'feeble in purpose and in will', resulting in their complete non-interest in life as 'life itself was a poor spiritless

⁵⁷This novel is autobiographical in content and one can see Krupabai in the role of Saguna here; Krupabai Sathianadhan, Saguna: A story of native Christian life, (Madras, 1895).

affair.’⁵⁵ No matter how much a Hindu woman tried to assert and control her life, Krupabai felt that ‘the book of fate would come to pass do what she could to avert it.’⁵⁶

In complete contrast to Kamala is Saguna, the subject of Krupabai’s second novel, whose life is described as ‘bright’ in comparison to Kamala’s ‘dark’ one. Saguna’s life is influenced by the ‘new order of things’, which Krupabai says is sweeping all over India.⁵⁷ The ‘new order of things’ refers to the introduction of Christianity as a choice for Indians dissatisfied with the old order of life. We read that Saguna’s life was influenced and her character moulded by her own parents’ spiritual struggle to overcome the bigotry and superstition of their ancestral religion - Hinduism. Her childhood is described as a sweet and innocent one nurtured in domestic peace and quiet, where learning was encouraged and her freedom of speech and action was unchecked. Her eldest sister is treated as an equal and a friend by her father and her brother.

Patience, gentleness and kindness suffuses the Saguna household and comfort in suffering and contentment in poverty mark their lifestyle. It is suggested that Christian life is of a ‘purer faith’ and ‘higher culture’ than Hindu life and that it encourages open-mindedness in those who profess it. Thus, Saguna is given complete choice in pursuing a profession - a freedom unthinkable for Hindu girls of her day except in the most radical circles. Saguna’s female friends are allowed to interact freely with young men and choose their own spouses. In the mission school, Saguna meets Christian girls, all of whom had a ‘definite work in view’ and were receiving training for it.⁵⁸ Krupabai tells the readers what was so appealing about Christianity through the voice of Saguna:

I needed the sympathy of one infinite in power, infinite in mercy who had lived the

⁵⁵Ibid., p.57.

⁵⁶Ibid., p.58.

⁵⁷This novel is autobiographical in content and one can see Krupabai in the role of Saguna here; Krupabai Sathianadhan, Saguna: A story of native Christian life, (Madras, 1895).

⁵⁸Ibid., p.166.

life of man in this world, and who understood human motives and human longings, and was capable of satisfying them.⁵⁹

Saguna is later enthused with the idea of serving and improving the condition of her Indian sisters. To her Christianity was the only religion that taught 'duty' to 'others' in the most generous meaning of the term. She enrolls in a medical college to become a doctor. To her this was a more appealing philosophy than a religion which, in her view, taught a narrow idea of 'duty' for a woman, i.e., to a husband, regardless of the latter's worthiness. Krupabai, thus focused the entire narrative on the growth of Saguna through Christian influence into a confident and independent 'new woman'.

So far we have seen how a certain section of Maharashtrian women broke away from the inherited Hindu past and found a new sense of freedom of thought and liberty of action in a new religion. In the next section we will examine whether this break meant a break with the traditional roles of Indian women too.

Women's entry into the public arena

In breaking with the past, Christian women created new roles for themselves in the later half of the nineteenth century. The creation of a separate public sphere for themselves was marked by the unique way in which they dropped caste distinctions and attempted to overcome race and class barriers too.

One of the most enduring projects they launched into was female education. While contesting Hindu men's exclusive right to education, Christian women, in an acute manner, articulated a sensitive critique of Hindu women's opposition or reluctance to participate in the ongoing reform movements. Krupabai analysed Hindu family structure and concluded that Hindu women wielded considerable influence in the home.⁶⁰ The only way Hindu women could exercise power over their menfolk was in enforcing rituals and thus seeking submission from family members. Therefore, she argued, they had to be taught that true power did not arise out of covert methods but in demanding equal rights with men. They had to be taught that rituals and

⁵⁹Ibid, p.185.

⁶⁰Krupabai, 'Women's influence at home', in Miscellaneous writings, pp.1-7.

ceremonies hindered women's progress in the long term. The only solution was provision of equal education for women.

Shewatibai Nikambe believed that beliefs which affected women adversely like the idea that child-widows should be ill-treated by their families in the superstitious belief that they had 'swallowed their husbands' were due to the ignorance of women and could be combated by educating them.⁶¹ According to Pandita Ramabai, Hindu daughters-in-law believed that the only way to win the love of a wayward husband was by administering love-potions given by wandering mendicants, which in a large number of cases turned out to be poisonous substances, estranging the husband further.⁶² Soonderbai Powar, asserted that the system of dedicating girls to Khandoba (deity in Maharashtra) was due to the ignorance of women who made a vow to gods and if granted they took the girl-child to the priests for 'dedication to God', which in practice meant prostitution.⁶³ Thus Christian female leaders thought education was essential for the emancipation of women.

Educational schemes differed widely in the nature of the curriculum and degree of segregation they proposed depended on the ideological convictions of individual women. For example, it was Soonderbai Powar's sincere conviction that until the Gospel had been absorbed no Hindu woman could be emancipated, however liberal an education she might have acquired. Therefore, in spite of Pandita Ramabai's protests she left Mukti to start a Zenana Teacher's Training School meant exclusively to train Christian women to equip themselves for a career in gospel preaching. The curriculum in her school was a three-year course of study in Christian and Hindu theology. In the first year, the Old and New Testament were taught; in the second year, a more advanced knowledge of the Bible and the chief doctrines of Christianity. In the third year, special instruction was given enabling pupil-trainees to understand something of the beliefs of the people amongst whom they worked and the best way

⁶¹Address of Shewatibai Nikambe, Annual Report of American Ramabai Association, 17 Mar. 1897, p.29, (ICMM).

⁶²Pandita Ramabai, Stri-Dharma niti (Prescribed laws and duties on the proper conduct of women) (Marathi), (Kedgaon, 3rd. ed., 1967), 1st. ed., 1882, pp.74-75.

⁶³Soonderbai Powar, Hinduism and womanhood, pp.47-48.

of meeting their arguments and their difficulties. Marathi and Hindustani were taught, the latter language being necessary to enable them to reach Muslims. The class of women who joined her school were Christian girls from families or missions. The women who passed out of her school were to follow the career of Bible-women, catechists, Sunday and Epiphany school teachers.⁶⁴

Unlike Soonderbai, Pandita Ramabai believed that the most oppressed class among women were widows and therefore her first institution, Sharada Sadan, was exclusively meant for high caste Hindu widows. It was meant to train and equip them for a profession that would make them independent of their families and relatives. Sharada Sadan did admit non-widows, especially young, single girls until 1892, but only upto the time when widows had not filled up the places. In 1892, when the numbers of widows increased to 62, non-widows were no longer admitted.⁶⁵ Pandita Ramabai, however, made an exception in the case of deserted wives.

In 1892 Sharada Sadan had seven Marathi standards and 4 Anglo-Vernacular standards. The Matriculation exam was added in 1895. The curriculum appears to have consisted of English, Marathi language and literature; history, geography and mathematics were also taught in the higher standards.⁶⁶ The curriculum appears to be the same as in the state-run boy's schools. Pandita Ramabai sent her most promising students after their matriculation to America for higher education right up to 1910. The reason is unclear though it is likely that funding abroad was more readily available. Women who were not inclined to intellectual activities were trained for a living in the weaving, dairy, oil-pressing and printing industry that had been started in Mukti by 1900.

In 1895 Pandita Ramabai made a radical departure in her policy of recruiting girls by including prostitutes. As we have seen, the process began when she observed the work of the Wantage Sisters in England. In 1895, she heard about the dreadful fate that befell high-caste Hindu widows in North India and visited Brindavan. Here she rescued two hundred prostitutes who did not want to follow the profession. In 1899

⁶⁴Storrie, Soonderbai Powar, p.67.

⁶⁵Annual Report of American Ramabai Association, 2 Feb. 1894, p.15, (ICMM).

⁶⁶Mukti Prayer Bell, 1906, pp.6-7, (ICMM).

she formally inaugurated a rehabilitation centre for prostitutes called Kripa Sadan. Convinced that they needed special care and a different kind of instruction, she segregated them from the Sharada Sadan girls.

Most of the Christian women of the period early on imbibed Victorian ideas of family life. Pandita Ramabai and Soonderbai believed firmly that 'God's ideal is family life'. Pandita Ramabai encouraged all her students whether unmarried girls, widows or deserted wives to marry and raise a family. Towards this end, purely from a strategic point of view, i.e., to find them good husbands, she invited Christian men from all denominations to join her Industrial Schools and even opened a boys school after 1900.⁶⁷ Christian women leaders were instrumental in beginning a new type of marriage, a midway arrangement between an arranged and choice marriage. Pandita Ramabai had announced publicly Mukti's policy on the matter and soon radical young Hindus also wrote and asked for educated female students from their institutions. Surprisingly, many of the Christian women pioneers did not practise what they preached.⁶⁸

Franscina Sorabji, was one of the few women who differed radically from her contemporaries due to her ideology, which is reflected in her educational enterprise.⁶⁹ She started a unique educational experiment in 1876 by opening the Victoria High School meant primarily for Eurasian girls and boys. This broke two boundaries - race

⁶⁷Manoramabai reported that in a single year twenty-two girls from Mukti were married. Mukti Prayer Bell, Sept. 1906, (ICMM).

⁶⁸Manoramabai, Soonderbai Powar, Cornelia Sorabji and Mary Bhor remained single.

⁶⁹**Franscina Santya Sorabji: (1833-1905)** A second generation Indian Christian from Nasik. She was adopted by Lady Georgina and Sir Francis Ford at the age of 12. She had an eclectic education with her adoptive parents who were Orientalists. Even though she was given an English education she was brought up to feel proud of India. She married Kharsedji Sorabji in 1853. In the 1860s when her husband was managing his Industrial School in Nasik she went out to villages as a catechist. In 1876 she started a unique educational experiment in Poona under the name of Victoria High School which was the first school in India run by an Indian for Eurasian children. She opened four more schools for Indian children which were ably managed by three of her daughters. In 1886 she visited England in order to raise money for her schools under the auspices of the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission. She was an important witness for the Hunter Education Commission of 1883. As a pioneer educationalist, her help and advice were sought after by many including Pandita Ramabai. She combined a passionate loyalty to the Queen with a spiritual allegiance to Christianity. She believed that British rule was good for India. Her influence as a feminist on her own daughters was such that all six of them broke traditional boundaries both in profession and marriage.

and sex segregation. She started out with 7 children and the school flourished in the 1880s showing on its rolls over 400 students belonging to the Indian, European and Eurasian races. She devised a Kindergarten system which was Indian in character. It was a forerunner of the Montessori schools and catered to the needs of children from all religions, and was sensitive to the peculiar religious requirements of each. It was Indian in character because the books and the teaching methods adopted used Indian symbols and metaphors instead of the English primers which were full of imagery unknown to Indian children. What set her apart from her contemporaries was that her outlook did not allow her to see her personal faith in Christian principles as the only solution for the emancipation of Indian womanhood. She kept her personal convictions divorced from her public schemes.

Women who had no clear ideological slant but were motivated by a desire to serve 'Indian womanhood', especially as the benefactors of charismatic leaders, were guided more by circumstances in the way they entered the public sphere. Shewatibai Nikambe, a headmistress of a girl's school run by the Students' Scientific and Literary Society of Bombay opened her own school called the Princess Girls High School in 1890. She saw a great need for such an institution due to the vacuum created when Pandita Ramabai shifted the Sharada Sadan to Poona and a large number of girls from high-caste Hindu families in Bombay were reluctant to send their children to a different town.⁷⁰

When the Chairman of the American Ramabai Association, Judith Andrews interviewed girls from the Sharada Sadan, she was surprised to hear how many of them wanted to emulate the example of their 'Ayi' or mother' (Pandita Ramabai) or 'Akka' or elder sister' (Soonderbai Powar). Both Pandita Ramabai and Soonderbai took an interest in the careers of their students after the completion of their education. The more promising and enterprising of them opened schools for girls in the towns where their husbands resided or entered into professions as matrons, teachers, catechists, nurses and Bible-women.⁷¹

⁷⁰Preface by Lady Harris to Shewantibai M. Nikambe, Ratanbai: A sketch of a Bombay high caste Hindu young wife, (London, 1895), pp.v-vii.

⁷¹Annual Report of American Ramabai Association, 11 Mar. 1895, pp.29-30, (ICMM).

Many other women from the second generation gained personal satisfaction in furthering their own careers as well as playing the hitherto unknown role of being bread-winners for their families. Malanbai Kukde, for example, is said to have educated four of her younger brothers from her earnings as a teacher.⁷² More ambitious women like Mary Bhor cut out a niche for themselves in indigenous society, at the same time gaining the respect of the colonial elite too.⁷³ This category of women used their education not from a 'mission' point of view but from a professional outlook alone.

Welfare activity and conflict with the state

Another important area of public activity which Indian Christian women opened was in the sphere of 'social service'. In a period when 'social work' and 'welfare' were barely comprehended by the Indian masses, Christian women not only legitimised but also popularised the emergence of women in this profession.

Social historians have barely touched the social and economic processes through which women were affected by the plague and famine outbreaks of the late nineteenth century. In this section the different ways Maharashtrian society's problems affected women will be charted. To an extent not hitherto recognised, Indian Christian women were active in plague and famine relief works. But were they prompted solely by social service ideals imbibed from Western Christian discourse or were there other reasons besides self-sacrificing religious zeal? As women entered social work they were enmeshed with the economics of opium, drink and the traffic in prostitution associated with the Contagious Diseases Act. In doing so, they also clashed with the colonial government over these issues. It is therefore necessary to consider how

⁷²Cited in Yashodabai Joshi, Amchi Jivanpravas (Our journey together), (Marathi), (Poona, 1965), p.49.

⁷³**Mary Bhor:(1865?-1913)** Daughter of Rao Saheb Ramji Gangaji Bhor. As a second generation Christian she took advantage of her English education. She had a Teacher's Training Certificate from London. In her capacity as Headmistress, she had travelled widely in Bombay Presidency. In the 1890s, she held a high-salaried appointment as a Governess to the Princesses of Baroda. She became the Lady Superintendent of the Poona Female High School around 1905. She wrote a travelogue in English called My Impressions of England (Poona, 1900) and a Marathi novel-Pushpakarandak (Basket of flowers), in 1890. The novel is free from commentary on Hinduism and Christianity but falls in the genre of Marathi literature of nineteenth century in its straightforward black and white characters like the 'good and virtuous Shanta' and the 'bad prostitute Sundrabai'.

women came to contest the state's control over women's rights.

As a gospel-teacher, Soonderbai Powar, worked in Bombay between 1868 and 1888. Besides preaching in Hindu homes as a zenana teacher she was regularly called on to supervise Sunday schools and address lunch-time factory meetings where hundreds of mill-hands gathered to listen to her. During these years she came into close contact with the working class of Bombay. From the female labourers, she heard the story of the migration of kunbis from their villages to Bombay in search of employment in order to clear their debts, the long hours that women worked, and the new habits of opium and drink their malefolk took to, in order to relieve the stress of an urban life of continuous toil.

Soonderbai became a well-known figure among the poor of Bombay and gained a reputation for her sympathy with them in mission circles. In 1889 she was approached by the London Office of the Bombay Guardian, a Christian weekly, which had heard of her experience among the working class of Bombay. They asked her to represent India on the subject of the opium trade in India and enlighten the British public on the matter. Soonderbai, who regularly contributed on these issues to the Bombay Guardian, gladly agreed. Between 1888 and 1889 she travelled all over England, Scotland and Ireland. Her tour was so successful that she was called again in 1892-3. Her work was carried out under the direction of the secretary of the Women's Anti-Opium Urgency League and was widely publicised in all the leading papers.⁷⁴

Even though Soonderbai had witnessed at first hand the manner in which opium and drink affected working class lives in Bombay, she visited other cities like Lucknow, Madras and Calcutta in order to acquaint herself with the situation elsewhere in India. In one such meeting, in Lucknow, two hundred Muslim women met her and detailed their suffering.⁷⁵ Armed with these facts Soonderbai addressed 116 meetings in Britain. Here she communicated the stories told to her by women

⁷⁴See article on Soonderbai Powar in, The Woman's Herald, 14 Jan. 1893, (Fawcett Library). This newspaper was formerly known as Women's Penny Paper.

⁷⁵One woman told Soonderbai to tell English people how opium was ruining her brother and his family. She reported that 'He has a wife and four children. His wages are 2 annas a day. He spends one anna on opium, leaving one anna to provide food for 5 people. They have one meal a day. His wife and children are weak with hunger.' Storrie, Soonderbai Powar, pp.38-39.

about how opium was sold as freely as rice and how strong men knocked themselves senseless starving their families, how infants were freely dosed to enable their mothers to work in factories, how unhappy women resorted to it to put an end to their suffering.

She dispelled a great number of 'orientalist' notions about how well opium suited the Indian constitution. She challenged her audience to administer six grains to herself and watch how well it suited her! At another meeting there was an argument that Indians used it as a medicine, to which she replied that 'when they know that 5 or 6 grains is a fatal dose, and yet any one can buy 1,600 grains without any questions asked, how can government claim that it is sold as medicine?'⁷⁶ Her argument was that a 'so-called Christian' government refused to abolish such evils because of the revenue it gained every year from the trade in India which was from a colony while in England there were strict regulations controlling its sale as a drug. She concluded from this that the government's policy indicated no concern for its subjects. Soonderbai was probably the only Indian woman to take an openly confrontational stance over the opium issue.

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, Indian Christian women were more concerned with alcoholism among the working classes. They had felt the need to start a temperance movement and to this end they had founded an organisation in Bombay called, *Striyanchi Madhyanishedhak Sabha* (Women's Anti-Drink Society).⁷⁷ Approximately fifty women were members of this society. Shevantibai Canaren was the President of this organisation and Mrs. Shewantibai Nikambe the Secretary. Their method of spreading awareness of the problems of alcoholism was through preaching in factories and schools.

Like Soonderbai on the opium issue, Pandita Ramabai sharply opposed the state on the question of the Contagious Diseases Acts and plague and famine relief works. Quite a few women have left accounts of the harassment they were subjected to during the plague operations of 1897. Lakshmibai recounts her anxiety when she travelled with her four year old son, Dattu who had malaria from Jalalpur to

⁷⁶Ibid., pp.39-40.

⁷⁷Dnyanodaya(Marathi), 14 and 21 Aug. 1890, (CSASC).

Pandharpur. Dattu was running a fever and she was told at Nagar that inspection awaited her at Dhond junction. All night she gave cold compresses to her son to bring down the fever. She describes the crude and harsh treatment they received:

The moment we descended from the train we were caught in a cordon. All the carriages were locked, and to each in turn came a doctor, police and railway officials with a rope barricade, then, as animals loosed from a pen, the people in the carriages were herded into the enclosure. After everyone had been inspected by the doctor, the passengers passed were given permission to proceed. The people from our 'pen' were likewise examined. I was terrified for Dattu, but his hands were quite cool, and he was passed at once and we then went to sit and wait for the Pandharpur train at the other side.⁷⁸

Plague operations affected the able management and administration of the institutional work of Pandita Ramabai and Soonderbai. Soonderbai's Zenana Teacher's Training School was situated in the cantonment area of Poona, and within 24 hours notice she could and was evicted under the Cantonment Act. When plague reached Poona, a few of her girls contracted it and she had to vacate the house with the remaining ones. She experienced great difficulty in procuring another large house for her students, a problem further compounded by rocketing food prices and difficulty in finding drinking water. She was able to pull through this crisis only with the help of missionaries.⁷⁹ For five years, from 1897 to 1903, Pandita Ramabai was forced to move out of Poona because of the plague regulations. Eventually the colossal expenditure in energy and money led her to shift to Kedgaon permanently.⁸⁰

The direct interference of the colonial authorities in the management of their institutions forced Pandita Ramabai and Soonderbai to concern themselves directly with state policy. In 1897 twenty of the girls from Pandita's institution were classified

⁷⁸Lakshmibai Tilak, I follow after: An Autobiography, E. Josephine Inkster, (tr.), (London, 1950), p.169.

⁷⁹The American Methodist Episcopal Mission lent her a huge shamiana(tent) which she turned into a home for a while. Helen Dyer's Introduction to Soonderbai, Hinduism and womanhood, p.9.

⁸⁰Pandita Ramabai's report to the Executive Committee of The American Ramabai Association, 1903, p.23, (ICMM).

as suffering from 'fevers' and were taken to the plague hospital. Eighteen were returned back and two were reported dead. Pandita was not convinced by the death certificates and went to investigate and verify the police statements. She soon found that the 'dead' girls were lured by promises of marriage and had become mistresses of two Indian officials, one of whom was a policeman. The girls voluntarily went back with the Pandita and, charging the hospital authorities of negligence and irresponsibility, she called for an inquiry.⁸¹ The Government of Bombay was forced to inquire into the matter, but the Governor wrote to her dismissing her grievances. Pandita Ramabai, however, continued to be perturbed by what she considered the misdeeds of the government and she soon clashed with it again over the famine relief regulations.

During the famine of 1896-7 Pandita Ramabai 'rescued' five hundred girls from what she termed as an 'ignominious' life. She retained 300 high-caste Hindu girls and sent the remainder to other missions. In 1897 Pandita Ramabai's institutions were full and she was facing a financial crisis as the ten-year commitment of the American Ramabai Association was coming to an end and she was not sure of finding funds after 1898. What prompted her to service during the famine? She recollected that her own experiences in the 1877 famine were so dreadful (she had watched her parents and sister perish due to starvation) that she could not find rest until she had done her best. Her famine relief work in Itarsi and around Poona brought her in close contact with the management of Poor houses and Relief Works.

She found that only able-bodied men were able to meet the requirements of the relief works. Women with a delicate constitution or debilitated for lack of food for a long time were unable to break up the twelve baskets of stone required to secure one meal a day. Many such women were, according to Pandita Ramabai, forced to 'sell their virtue' to the works officials in order to survive.⁸² After conducting her own investigations with the help of some of her trusted female workers in the relief camps

⁸¹Pandita Ramabai's letter 27 Jan. 1897, The Bombay Guardian, (ICMM).

⁸²Pandita Ramabai's experiences in the famine-struck areas were recorded by her in two articles re-printed in two issues of the Bombay Guardian. The first article was entitled, 'Famine experiences in India' appeared on 20 Jan. 1897, pp.6-9; the second, entitled, 'Pandita Ramabai's second famine tour', appeared on 6 May 1897, pp.10-13, (ICMM).

she came to the conclusion that there was an 'organised vice trade' operating within the Poor houses and relief camps. Her workers reported that mukaddams (low-ranking Indian officials) in the form of cooks, store-keepers, and overseers were exploiting young orphaned famine girls and this was compounded by the apathy and interference of higher officials.⁸³ She argued that the least the government could do to improve the situation was to relax the rules for the employment of women on roads and railways and ensure better protection for them. Instead, when she arrived in Poona with 120 emaciated girls, the City Magistrate debarred her from entering the town even though she gave him an assurance that she would hire several houses for their welfare. She was not granted permission and therefore had to take the girls to Talegaon where a large number of them died as the village had no adequate medical facilities.⁸⁴ She felt justified in expecting the government to assist rather than obstruct the efforts of private institutions and individuals in famine work.

Simultaneously she carried on an agitation for the abolition of the Cantonment Acts. It is likely that Indian Christian women were influenced by the campaigns led by Englishwomen under the leadership of Josephine Butler against the Contagious Diseases Act, which was repealed in England in 1886.⁸⁵ Even though the Contagious Diseases Act was repealed in India in 1888, the military authorities in India made provision for the use of prostitutes by British soldiers through the system of registering, inspecting and detaining them in lock hospitals until they were cured of venereal diseases under the Cantonment Acts.⁸⁶ She reported that British soldiers were a great cause of oppression in the princely states where they exploited starving

⁸³When Pandita demanded an enquiry the Deputy Collector admitted to her in the course of the discussion that he was aware of such happenings in the poor-houses but was not in a position to remedy them. *ibid.*, pp.11-12.

⁸⁴6 May 1897, Bombay Guardian, p.13, (ICMM).

⁸⁵For the agitation led by English women against the Contagious Diseases Act, see Judith Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian society: Women, class and the state, (Cambridge, 1980).

⁸⁶Agitation against the Cantonment Acts was taken up by missionaries and English reformers and the Acts were amended in 1897. Even so, the new Acts allowed prostitutes to live in the camps as well as compulsory examinations continued to be practised upto 1900. For these Acts and the agitation surrounding them, see Kenneth Ballhatchet, Race, sex and class under the Raj: Imperial attitudes and policies and their critics, 1793-1905, (London, 1980), especially Chapters Two and Three.

young women during the famine years. Soldiers, moreover, prevented female missionaries from starting their own segregation units within the mission compounds inspite of the fact that the government camps were cramped and unhygienic. This led her to believe that the government was conniving in advocating 'legalised vice'. She publicised the matter through the press in the firm belief that 'The BIRTHRIGHT OF INDIAN WOMEN HAD BEEN TRAMPLED[sic] long enough,' and wrote to her friends and supporters in England and America about the atrocities towards Indian women committed under the Cantonments Act for the 'benefit of the British soldiers'.⁸⁷ She pleaded with the Christians of England and India to wake up and try their best not to allow 'the dreadful demon, the C.D.Act[sic] come into existence again.'⁸⁸ She also foresaw the collapse of British rule in India if it continued with such iniquities. It is significant to note here that while Indian men like V.N.Mandlik argued against the Contagious Diseases Act saying that respectable women were being exposed to oppression, Indian women argued for the protection of the rights of women.⁸⁹

While influential Indians fled the town of Poona during the plague operations of 1897, women like Franscina Sorabji stayed back, visiting the stricken areas with her school staff and family members. Her best work was in dispelling wild rumours regarding the government plague regulations which she did successfully with her knowledge of Marathi, Gujarati, and Hindi.⁹⁰ Cornelia recalled her mother's gentle persuasion with families of plague-victims that they were not being injected with Christianity through the serum! She also took great pains to explain the efficacy of segregation, and the disinfection of homes and when government officers dug up floor-boards with the help of soldiers, she would explain to terror-stricken residents

⁸⁷Pandita Ramabai's appeal to 'The Friends of Mukti School and Mission', (typed manuscript), Mar. 1891, pp.7-11, (ICMM).

⁸⁸6 May 1897, Bombay Guardian, p.12, (ICMM).

⁸⁹Besides V.N.Mandlik other Indian men expressed their alarm regarding the general and indefinite language of the Cantonment Act affecting the 'respectable classes'. See Ballhatchet, Race, sex and class, pp.48-64.

⁹⁰Cornelia Sorabji, 'Therefore', An impression of Sorabji Kharsedji Langrana and his wife Franscina, (London, 1924), pp.67-70.

that it did not mean a search for their possessions. She led a campaign to persuade the government to make sure that soldiers did not indiscriminately vandalise Indian homes and unlike Pandita Ramabai, was fairly successful in getting a hearing because of her tact and connections in high places.

Adopting Christianity did not necessarily mean that such women dropped caste barriers instantly. Some like Lakshmibai Tilak experienced a painful struggle with her notions of pollution before she could claim to be caste-less. Once they were able to overcome these barriers many tested their convictions by adopting Mang and Mahar (from the lowest castes) girls as their own. While it may be surmised that welfare activities ensured women roles, hitherto unknown, in the public arena it also highlights that they never strayed from their original commitment to the 'welfare of Indian women'. Their feminist leanings were never as clear as they are in their programmes for the relief of women. Significantly, welfare works also heightened their consciousness of women's common problems brought on by the negative attitudes of state officials. In the next section we shall see how tensions built up between Indian Christian women and their 'white sisters'.

Interaction with missions: conflict over belief and method

When Indian Christian women forged their links with the West, an important mediator was the white female missionary. Missions belonging to different churches befriended Indian Christian women and rendered services to them through forming their beliefs, clearing their doubts and helping them in times of distress through funds. Indian Christian women acknowledged this help too. However, in organisational work they differed in approach and methods of action.

The various missionary creeds, for example, Catholic, Anglican, Evangelical, profoundly affected the beliefs of Christian women, yet the more influential among them filtered these ideas and sieved out what did not suit the interests of their enterprises. Thus Soonderbai and Pandita Ramabai in particular were severely criticised throughout their careers for their unconventional religious beliefs. Neither belonged to any church nor did they profess any kind of attachment to a particular denomination. Various accusations were hurled against them and they were called mercenaries exploiting Christian sympathy to promote the welfare of 'high caste

Hindu women'.⁹¹ They were attacked by Western missionaries as well as influential Indian Christians like Baba Padmanji and S.B.Lotlikar.

It is important to understand why they resisted belonging to any particular creed or sect. It has been shown earlier that all of them believed that in the spirit of Christ there was neither male nor female. Their feminist critique of Hinduism rejected it as a religion which preached inequality between the sexes either as part of Hindu doctrines themselves or through their interpretation by Hindu priests. As Christians they were now being pressured into accepting a particular church in order to carry on their work. But Pandita Ramabai was very critical of divisive tendencies within the church. Her correspondence on theological questions clearly reveals why she chose not to belong to any denomination. In a letter to Sister Geraldine in 1885 she expressed her non-conformist views thus:

I have just with great efforts freed myself from the yoke of the Indian priestly tribe, so I am not at present willing to place myself under another similar yoke by accepting everything which comes from the priests as authorised Command of the Most High.⁹²

Obedience to the law and to the Word of God, according to her, were quite different from obedience to priests alone. Soonderbai also conducted her work on non-denominational lines in the belief that allegiance to a particular church meant subordination to mediating agencies. Neither of them wanted any intermediaries between God and themselves. Soonderbai, on her tours in England, was constantly asked about her denominational status to which she wittily replied 'King's Own'.⁹³

Victorian values were derived at least in part from the Church's views on female sexuality. Domestic ideology and its constituents were reinforced by clergy too. Accepting allegiance to any particular church meant accepting Victorian beliefs.

⁹¹S.M.Adhav, 'Pandita Ramabai', paper read at Church History Association of India, Western India Branch, 12 Mar. 1978, p.1, (ICMM).

⁹²Pandita Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, 12 May 1885, in A.B.Shah, (ed.), Letters and correspondences of Pandita Ramabai, (Bombay, 1977), p.59.

⁹³Storrie, Soonderbai Powar, p.45.

Among them were sex segregation and the biological determinist theories which outlined separate spheres: these were prime concerns to Indian Christian women. To someone like Pandita Ramabai who was teaching women carpentry and masonry, the natural division theory was an unsuitable one.⁹⁴ On one occasion when Pandita Ramabai was Professor of Sanskrit at the Cheltenham Ladies College, she wanted to teach British officers preparing for a career in India but when she sought permission to do so through Dorothea Beale, the Principal she was told that the clergy would not allow it as a transgression of natural laws! In a transitional period like the nineteenth century rapid changes had not yet crystallised into rigid rules and women like Cornelia Sorabji taught for a year in a male college in Ahmedabad and Pandita Ramabai addressed all-male Indian audiences. Any strict conformity to church laws would mean a curtailment of their freedom of speech and action. Likewise, Soonderbai was able to reject modern interpretations of the Bible and taught her own versions which she felt were closer to the spirit of the Bible.

While bearing the brunt of missionary attacks on their belief and work, Indian Christian women were themselves active in criticising Western missionary attitudes towards Indian culture and Indians. The earliest commentaries on 'racism' among women were by Indian Christian women. Krupabai, at the age of fourteen noted the insolence and arrogance of Western missionaries towards Indians. She recalled her humiliation and anger, at which her mother had tried to console her by saying that:

...how can you expect them to be friends. Dont you see the difference, they are white and we are black. We ought to be thankful for the little notice that they take us.⁹⁵

Cornelia Sorabji also called for a 'certain change in the attitude of the mind' if Westerners wanted a genuine interaction with Indians.⁹⁶ Indian Bible-women also

⁹⁴Pandita Ramabai to Rev. Dr.Pentecost, 6 Dec. 1892, in Chikat pustak (Note-book) of Pandita Ramabai, (Rajas Dongre's collection), (ICMM).

⁹⁵Krupabai, Saguna, p.108.

⁹⁶Cornelia Sorabji, 'Social relations', Pan-Anglican Papers, pp.1-4, (ICMM).

observed the differences between 'old' and 'new' missionaries. The 'new' ones they felt were 'cold, unemotional and kept barriers with supercilious airs', and they predicted that with such attitudes Western missionaries would not convert a Hindu in a thousand years!⁹⁷

Indian Christian women were also among the first to criticise 'orientalist' notions by marking out Western missionaries as a vehicle for them. They brought into sharp focus their inclination to address Indians as 'benighted heathens' and classify them along with the aboriginals of Australia and Red Indians of America. The contempt and unjustified arrogance of Western missionaries they felt arose through such classifications. Pandita Ramabai insisted that all missionaries who embarked on a voyage to India should learn about the ancient literature of the Hindus. In addition, they should admit what was good and true about the Vedas and thus show fairness and love of truth.⁹⁸

She was convinced that Western missionaries were alienating and hardening the hostility of Indians and thus harming the cause of Christianity in India. Further, she argued that St. Paul himself, as an apostle, became a Jew to the Jews, Greek to the Greeks, and 'God's method of work' seemed to her to be, 'building on the old foundations keeping that which is good, and destroying only that which is evil, decaying, ready to perish'.⁹⁹ She saw no rationale in decrying everything in the Indian scriptures and expected missionaries to argue with Indians on an intellectual level regarding the particularities of each religion.

This explains why Indian Christian women were constantly stressing 'Indianness' and maintained Indian diet, dress and etiquette.¹⁰⁰ Manoramabai went

⁹⁷Saguna, pp.132-40.

⁹⁸Pandita Ramabai, 'Indian religion', Cheltenham Ladies College Magazine, no.13, Spring 1886, pp.106-18, (ICMM).

⁹⁹Ibid., p.107.

¹⁰⁰Lakshmibai notes how in dress, Indian Christian women rejected the trailing gowns and skirts of Western women and instead wore a modified dress which was Indian as far as it was a sari and a blouse. The difference from Maharashtrian Hindu women was that the sari was not divided and drawn between the legs and tucked at the back but fell loosely like the pleats of a skirt and the blouse was modified to the extent of having wrist-length sleeves. They also wore no ornaments except for two bangles on each wrist; I follow after, p.168.

to the extent of telling missionaries eager to work in Mukti that they ought to be aware of the fact that Mukti was a 'thoroughly Indian mission' and if they were not prepared to accept this style of life they should not come at all!¹⁰¹ A characteristic of Indian Christian women was to stress their 'Indianness', and in many a careful 'Foreword' writers stressed how the author had not 'denationalised' herself. It is very likely that Indian women felt the need to distinguish themselves from Western missionaries in order to be able to work ably in their welfare schemes for women without the negative connotations that Westerners were rapidly acquiring with their racist approach.

Even Indian Christian men were critical of the radical departures made by some of the Christian women in their methods. Pandita Ramabai had once delivered a kirtan (religious discourse in verse usually accompanied by musical instruments) in a temple to a female audience. She defended her action on the ground that women in small towns were not only shy and timid but also had no concept of modern-day notions of lectures and meetings. Therefore, she had used the kirtan to communicate practical lessons on social philosophy chosen from some Puranas and delivered them in a new style of lecture.¹⁰² When she was attacked by the Indian Christian community, she counter-attacked by pointing out that missionaries employed means like the 'magic-lanterns shows' and tamashas (Maharashtrian folk entertainment) to convey their message and so she felt justified in doing the same. The 'Indianness' they represented was also in the method of worship they consciously adopted from Hinduism and retained as good practice. Lakshmibai, Soonderbai and Pandita Ramabai believed in the bhakti form of worship, an emotional expression of love of God. In the 1900s a great 'Revival' was reported with large numbers of girls and women embracing Christianity.¹⁰³ Western missionaries sharply rebuked these forms of worship as expressions of paganism.

Does this expression of selective borrowing from Indian cultural heritage by

¹⁰¹Manoramabai to a would-be-worker abroad, n.d., (ICMM).

¹⁰²Pandita Ramabai's letter, 25 Jul. 1889, Dnyanodaya (Marathi), (CSASC).

¹⁰³Women in Mukti were reported to have fainting spells and trances while they witnessed God during this 'revival'.

Indian Christian women mean that they believed in the 'Golden Age' theory of a glorious Indian past? And if they did, what did the rejection of Hinduism imply?

'Golden Age' theories and Christian women

The cultural and ideological encounter between England and India in the nineteenth century saw the reconstitution of the ancient Indian past and a recasting of the image of Indian womanhood through the works of Orientalists, Utilitarians and the emerging Indian intelligentsia. Necessitated by the political exigency for the moral justification of empire, it took different forms and shapes. Orientalists dug deep into the roots of ancient Indian history and had come to the conclusion that a 'Golden Age' had indeed existed, an age marked by a just and egalitarian society, equal rights between the sexes, choice in marriage for men and women, an age when widows remarried without objection and women were highly educated.¹⁰⁴

In sharp contrast to the Orientalist notions of William Jones regarding the Indian past were the missionary views of William Carey and the works of early historians of India like Alexander Duff and James Mill who claimed that Hindu civilisation was a barbaric one steeped in immorality and injustice, and they partly arrived at this conclusion by the position granted to women in it.¹⁰⁵ Indigenous elites were responding to the works of Orientalists like Jones at this time as they provided argument for self-assertion and restoration of self-esteem at the very height of the British takeover of India. Indian elites were also engaged in a creation of a Hindu-Aryan identity in which too, the position of women was a central criterion.

Since the concept of the 'position of woman' was being used as an index for measuring the level of civilisation and national identity, it is of relevance to see whether women were responding by creating an identity for themselves, independent of the dominant discourse. Through Indian Christian women's responses we see a vital clue in defining the feminist content of their consciousness as well as it provides an

¹⁰⁴David Kopf, British Orientalism and the Bengal renaissance: The dynamics of Indian modernisation, 1773-1835, (Berkeley, 1969), pp.22-42.

¹⁰⁵For an analysis of the writings of colonial historians including James Mill, see Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever happened to the Vedic dasi?', in Sangari and Vaid (eds.), Recasting women, pp.34-36.



answer to their marginalisation during the early twentieth century.

Earlier in this chapter we discussed how women developed a perception of 'self' and defined a feminist position on the basis of a critique of the status of women in the two opposing choices of religion - Christianity and Hinduism. While analysing the position of women accorded in the religious precepts of Hinduism they were forced to reckon with the 'Golden Age' theories current in nineteenth-century Maharashtra. Among Christian women, Krupabai and Pandita Ramabai developed a fairly analytical critique of the 'Golden Age' theory. They constantly juxtaposed it with the position of women in contemporary Indian society thus making a clear distinction between the 'past' and the 'present', unlike indigenous male discourse - both revivalist and reformist - which maintained a continuum from the past into the present. Neither Krupabai nor Pandita Ramabai, rejected the 'Golden Age' theory in totality but come closest to what one may describe as a qualified rejection of it, contrary to what some recent feminist historians have suggested.¹⁰⁶

Krupabai maintained the view that there was 'something essentially wanting in the homes and the lives of educated Hindus' and this lack was the appalling ignorance and 'life-long slavery' of Hindu women. She then moved on to show that the ancient Hindus had far more liberal ideas than present-day adherents of the religion. In this context, she remarked that

they [the ancient Hindus] acknowledged the rights of women, to some extent, and gave them their true position in society. We have many distinct proofs that female education in early times was not neglected...We easily infer also from the writings of the ancient Hindus that the women of that period had a great many privileges which are now denied to them. Women chose their own husbands, or at least, had a voice in the selection of them...¹⁰⁷

Krupabai had no knowledge of Sanskrit but it is clear from her work that she was erudite and had presumably read the Orientalists' writing of Jones and others on the Indian past. Pandita Ramabai, while showing similar notions of the Hindu past, but

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p.68.

¹⁰⁷Krupabai, 'Female education', in Miscellaneous writings, pp.16-17.

having a formidable knowledge of Sanskrit literature, added that there were no caste distinctions in the Rig Vedic times, no widow-burning or exclusion of women. 'On the contrary', she wrote:

it is taken for granted that they are, as well as men, thinking beings, and even in the later Upanishads we find ladies conversing on equal terms with men on subjects of religion and philosophy. I think this may have something to do with the fact that these works are pronounced by modern Brahmans too sacred for us women to read; it is thought undesirable that the high-caste women of to-day, who are utterly secluded and forbidden to speak to any men except to very near relatives, should read in the Aranyakas of ladies conversing with great sages, such as Yagnavalkya, especially of Gargi, who like the English princess S.Hilda[sic], exercised authority over Brahmans, priests and monks.¹⁰⁸

If ancient Hindus had to 'some extent' granted a right to education and choice in marriage to women, why did they then discontinue it? Both Krupabai and Pandita Ramabai attributed this to the gradual ascendancy of the priestly class among Hindus. Nothing, according to them, marked the constitution of Hindu society as much as the power and influence that the Brahmin priesthood commanded over Hindus. In their opinion, it served the priest's interests to keep the Hindu woman as credulous and ignorant as possible, because a learned and clever woman, especially widows, would then manage their own affairs and estates without the aid of the family priest. Therefore, over the centuries, Hindu priesthood took every opportunity to decry women's learning and made learned women the cause of every misfortune that fell upon a family in India.

In this explanation for the degeneration of the position of women, we see the departure made by Christian women from the dominant revivalist, reformist and early nationalist discourse of their time. The opinions of Vivekananda, M.G.Ranade, or Bankim Chandra, taken as representatives respectively of these three strands in male discourse, tended to disavow Hindu responsibility for the downfall of women's position and attributed it instead to Muslim rule in India. The startling difference in

¹⁰⁸Pandita Ramabai, 'Indian religion', p.115.

the explanation offered by women is that they continued to hold Hindu men responsible for the deterioration in the status of women.

Indian Christian women did not agree with the image of womanhood portrayed in Hinduism as a body of religious doctrines although they were open to persuasion that the 'Golden Age' may have existed in the remote Hindu past and that, in this period, the female sex was accorded 'to some extent' the right of education and choice in marriage. They consistently maintained the position that Hindu law-givers were misogynists. Every kind of hateful sentiment about women pervaded the texts. What else, argued Krupabai, could explain why the birth of a girl was greeted with little, if any, enthusiasm in a Hindu home? Why else, asked Soonderbai, did female infanticide exist in so many parts of India? Why else, demanded Pandita Ramabai, should the sight of a widow be dreaded and considered an ill-omen? They perceived Hindu religion as one built on hierarchical and patriarchal lines whereby the man was considered 'superior' and the woman 'inferior'. In the eyes of Christian women, Hinduism was based on the impurity principle whereby a woman was considered unclean and polluted. This meant that she could never commune with god on her own but had to seek a priest or her husband as a mediator. Pandita Ramabai insisted that the religious consideration given to Hindu women was so little that over the centuries, Hindu women had 'usurped' several plant gods like the tulsi, banyan and the peepul.¹⁰⁹ But they were allowed to do so only because these gods were minor ones!

The qualified rejection of the image of womanhood is seen very clearly in the way Pandita Ramabai articulated the concept of sahadharmini. It meant equal status for a Hindu wife since she was supposedly a co-partner in the religious duties of a man. The concept of sahadharmini was used extensively in the dominant discourse of the nineteenth century especially by revivalists to prove the superiority of Vedic religion. Pandita Ramabai does not deny the existence of the concept of sahadharmini, but she revealed that it was a 'deceptive' one. She analysed the concept minutely to show that even if the wife was allowed to perform the same religious acts as her husband the extent of her participation was in bringing wood, fanning the fire, fetching water, cleaning sacrificial dishes, cooking the food offered to the idols and

¹⁰⁹Pandita Ramabai to Dr. E.W.Donald, 25 Oct. 1902, p.12, (ICMM).

washing up, while the husband chanted the hymns and made the offerings! Thus, Pandita Ramabai showed that 'the co-partnership of the wife with the husband in performing religious duties, consists in helping him in heavy work and other disagreeable things.'¹¹⁰ Thus to christian women the concept of sahadharmini was definitely mentioned in the Sanskrit texts, it may have even been practised in the 'Golden Age' but by no stretch of imagination were they willing to call it equality of rights for women.

Engagement with the 'Golden Age' theory helped Christian women to refine their critiques of the position of Indian women in the Indian past and contrast it better with their status in contemporary Indian society. Centuries had passed since the 'Golden Age' which to them represented harrowing times for Indian women. To the Hindu mind, they argued conflation of the religious with the social had resulted in the worst form of devaluation of womankind. Such a view of Indian history made them draw a sharp distinction between text and context, prescription and practice, and experience over theoretical norms.

They subverted nationalist and revivalist discourse by arguing that if the Indian nation was subjugated, it was because Indian women were enslaved; if India was not independent and laboured under foreign rule it was due to women's dependence for countless centuries on men; if Indian children were stigmatised as cowardly it was because their mothers were ignorant, superstitious and fearful. Therefore, if India was to be a sovereign nation, Indian womanhood had to be liberated. This was a successful inversion of the dominant discourse from which Christian women were selectively borrowing and re-organising to suit their feminist agendas.

In shaping a national identity for men and women, revivalist and nationalist discourse drew heavily on the positive image of womanhood as represented in British Orientalist scholarship.¹¹¹ Partha Chatterjee has recently demonstrated how the nationalist resolution of the women's question took place through the binary

¹¹⁰Pandita Ramabai, 'Woman's religion as taught by the Hindu shastras', Mukti Prayer Bell, Sept. 1906, p.26, (ICMM).

¹¹¹Jasodhara Bagchi has shown how Bankim Chandra resolved the tensions between Indian women of the past and the present in his literature, 'Positivism and nationalism: Womanhood and the crisis in nationalist fiction, Bankim Chandra's Anandmath', Economic and Political Weekly, 20:43, 1985, WS.58-62.

opposition of the male/West/material and female/East/spiritual within nationalist discourse.¹¹² But, in an otherwise convincing explanation, he fails to show how the resolution was made possible. It seems likely that it was possible for nationalists to do so by a text-over- context strategy. As far as the image of womanhood was concerned, dominant discourse did not break with the past. In fact, a common strand linking the various forms of discourse whether revivalist or nationalist was their construction of a feminine identity from the past and its continuation into the present.

It was such a representation of continuity that made Indian Christian women contest nationalist and revivalist discourse. An open confrontation took place in the 1890s when Vivekananda, a proponent of Hindu revivalism attended the Congress of Religions in Chicago. Of relevance here is his construction of an image of Indian womanhood and the Indian nation through a juxtaposition and use of feminine symbols. In an attempt to salvage the position of India among world civilisations, he presented a highly romanticised view of the Indian womanhood of the past. In his cosmic world view, the Hindu widow cheerfully ascended the funeral pyre of her husband in order to be united with him in the next life; Hindu men secluded women because they held them in high esteem; their immense respect for women held back a man from letting his wife out of his house.¹¹³ He denied that widows were ill-treated and asserted that Hindus wives inherited the entire property of their husbands besides being free agents to dispose of their stridhan (women's property accrued from their natal home).¹¹⁴ It was obviously a very different representation from Pandita Ramabai's lectures in America a few years earlier. Ramabai's fund-raisers, the sixty-five 'Ramabai circles' all over America challenged him and the American Ramabai Association furnished evidence regarding the authenticity of her accounts by publicising the letters of distinguished scholars and reformers like Max Muller, Miss

¹¹²Partha Chatterjee, 'Colonialism, nationalism, and colonialised women: The contest in India', American Ethnologist, 16:4, 1989, pp.622-33.

¹¹³Vivekananda's lectures reported in Salem Evening News, 29 Aug. 1893. From Marie Louise Burke, Swami Vivekananda in America: New discoveries, (Calcutta, 1958), p.32.

¹¹⁴Excerpts of Vivekananda's lectures reported in Detroit and Brooklyn newspapers; ibid., pp.487-88.

Manning, B. Malabari and D.K. Karve.¹¹⁵

There is no evidence of a dialogue between Ramabai and Vivekananda. However, Ramabai constantly warned Westerners to read in between the lines of the prescriptive texts of 'yellow-robed Swamis'. When an American visitor to the Mukti reported to her that Hindu swamis visiting America had spoken of the superior position granted to women in Hindu religion, she replied that 'it was not so lovely to experience it.'¹¹⁶ She appealed to Western women to judge Indian society by living among Indians. Experience to her was more important than reading Hindu texts. She pleaded:

I beg of my Western sisters not to be satisfied with looking on the outside beauty of the grand philosophies, and not to be charmed with hearing the long and interesting discourses of our educated men... There are many hard and bitter facts which we have to accept and feel. All is not poetry with us. The prose we have to read in our lives is very hard...¹¹⁷

She was acutely aware of the dangers of reading lofty philosophy without connecting it to material reality. It was just such a disjunction which she condemned in the Theosophists as represented in Annie Besant's rhetoric and work.¹¹⁸ As a romanticist, Annie Besant was defending the Hindu injunctions on 'purity' and 'chastity' as advocated for controlling widow's sexuality. Ramabai, critical of her anti-woman stand wrote sardonically that

sometimes, it looks as if the world is going backwards, when one hears English

¹¹⁵See their letters in Annual Report of American Ramabai Association, 1894, pp.27-29 and 1895, pp.31-41, (ICMM).

¹¹⁶Pandita Ramabai, A short history of Kripa Sadan, p.31.

¹¹⁷Ibid., pp.29-30.

¹¹⁸The Theosophical Society in India was popularised by Annie Besant, who became its leader in 1893. It started as a movement of socio-religious dissent in the West but in India it fused certain Buddhist concepts with the Hindu doctrine of Karma. Soon it started to support Hindu tradition and by 1900 compelled to defend Hindu orthodoxy and refrain from social criticism.

women, like Mrs. Besant, declaring that Hindu widows should never marry again.¹¹⁹

Krupabai was likewise critical of revivalists and nationalists who mystified Hinduism. She attacked the views of a certain 'educated man' who had lectured that 'purity of thought' as imparted to Hindu women by Hinduism, saved them from being unchaste, because, no matter whether the husband turned into a monster, yet she would continue to look upon him as her guardian and god and this was the strength of Hindu society.¹²⁰ Her rejoinder to his views was that there was not much chivalry in buying happiness at the cost of poor women's lives and if examples of such women existed it was an involuntary resignation to their pitiful lot due to their dependence on men. Knowledge gained through experience over textual representations, according to Christian women, was the only way the true position of women could be exposed and remedied.

How did indigenous elites react to the ideology and work of Indian Christian women? They consistently opposed their work on proselytising grounds, described in the all-embracing term 'Christian work'. Conservatives and reformers alike hampered their work. A 'fear of conversion' was not the only reason which made them so hostile. The educational politics of the time reveal other dimensions to the question. It will be shown later how the fate of the Poona Female High School, the brain-child of the reformers, was adversely affected by the popularity of Sharada Sadan.¹²¹ In 1892, reformists found it convenient to manipulate the 'fear of conversion' rumours to resign from the Advisory Board of Sharada Sadan and thus inflate the numbers on the roll-call of their school by deflating Ramabai's. D.K. Karve, the founder of the Hingne Widows Home which later grew into the first women's university in India admitted that Pandita Ramabai was hindered by the jealousy of Hindu circles who in turn lost a brilliant woman to their own causes. He also admitted that she was his

¹¹⁹Pandita Ramabai's annual report, Annual Report of the American Ramabai Association, 1904, p.21, (ICMM).

¹²⁰Krupabai, 'Hindu social customs', in Miscellaneous writings, pp.30-32.

¹²¹See Chapter Five for further details.

predecessor in founding a widows' home and if she had not lost the affections of Hindu society he would not have ventured to open his institutions!¹²² It is possible that the spectre of an independent, self-willed, assertive womanhood which Christian women represented was the uppermost factor in the opposition of Maharashtrian men. While the Hindu woman could be controlled in a manner that suited men, Christian women were not under their control and in this matter the Hindu male was very harsh in his dealings.

In the early twentieth century Indian Christian women began to be marginalised rapidly both within the women's movement as well as in the broader national campaign which still engaged with social reform activities.¹²³ The reasons for their isolation can be found in the Christian women's ideology. In the late nineteenth century they had successfully utilised the rhetoric of a nation's progress depending on the position of women. However, in the early half of the twentieth century the rhetoric of aggressive nationalism could only be countered with more rigorous legitimisation for the continued interest in gender-related social reform movements. It was precisely in this area that Indian Christian women failed. Most of them were suspicious of the Swadeshi movement on the ground that part of the boycott of things foreign meant opposition to foreign religions, too, i.e., Christianity.¹²⁴ This suspicion was compounded by Christian women's allegiance to liberal politics. Even though Christian women were critical of certain aspects of British rule, as shown in their agitation against the Cantonment Act, the opium trade and in the temperance movements, yet most of them believed that a 'parent-child' relationship between Britain and India was the best one in order to safeguard the interests of Indian

7 first
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early years?

¹²²See D.K.Karve, 'A living testimony', in Pandita Ramabai centenary souvenir, 1858-1958, 19 Apr. 1958, n.p; D.K.Karve, 'Pandita Ramabai', in Young Men of India, Jun. 1922, pp.302-5, (ICMM).

¹²³Both the English and the vernacular press regularly carried reports on the work of Christian female leaders in the late nineteenth century but between 1900 and 1920, they hardly find a mention in the Press.

¹²⁴Pandita Ramabai's answers to the questionnaire of Mr.Mott and others, World Missionary Conference, n.d., (ICMM).

women.¹²⁵ By 1910, Christian women like Pandita Ramabai and the Sorabji sisters openly opposed the methods of the nationalist agitation like picketing and burning of foreign cloth. This non-strategic move alienated them completely from the Indian society at large and gave way to the emergence of Hindu female leadership under Ramabai Ranade who led the women's movement till 1920.

Conclusion

Socio-religious reform movements in nineteenth-century India were almost like crusades where religious affiliation announced one's identity and purpose. A certain section of Maharashtrian women during this century undertook an analysis of Hinduism vis-a-vis Christianity, the latter presented to them by missionary discourse as a new choice, and rejected the former on the basis of a woman-centred approach to religion. They found in Christianity an avenue for self-definition and self-expression and religious consolation.

Adopting Christian doctrines helped them to break through caste barriers while associating with Western missionaries and community opened their eyes to White racism towards Indians. The 'welfare' and 'mission' rhetoric of Christianity was fruitfully applied by them to assert themselves-to break with traditional roles and legitimate their entry into public professional roles. Their uniqueness lies in the way they selectively chose from the dominant discourse of the time and used it in the cause of Indian womanhood, thus at once separating and distinguishing them from missionary, revivalist and nationalist discourse.

Indian Christian women empowered themselves in several ways. Firstly, they utilised Christianity as a vehicle of the movement for women's consciousness. Secondly, by relying on their own knowledge of Indian society, they asserted themselves by always contextualising their experience over textual representations. Thirdly, they demonstrated the indigenous roots of Indian feminism by maintaining a cultural distance from European Christianity as well as by separating themselves from denominational allegiance.

In the late nineteenth century a dynamic women's movement had begun in

¹²⁵Krupabai, Miscellaneous writings, pp.32-33; Cornelia Sorabji, 'Therefore', pp.58-61.

Maharashtra and Christian women were an important part of this pioneering effort. Their greatest contribution was the crucial support they gave to Hindu women, not only through their institutions but as path-breakers who showed the courage to step beyond accepted boundaries. The difference between the women's movement in late nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century is that the former was marked by the prominence of dynamic Indian Christian women who in many ways laid the foundations of the women's movement - through their ideology, organisation and entry into the public arena. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Hindu female leaders like Ramabai Ranade, who had been infused with strength from their Christian counterparts, built on this legacy and continued the movement till 1920. In the next chapter we shall examine the consciousness of Hindu women who directly or indirectly benefited from their Christian sisters.

CHAPTER II

HINDU WOMEN'S IDEOLOGY AND WORK

This chapter charts the growth of Hindu women's social and political power during the course of the social reform movement and the early nationalist period. It will be argued that both the awareness of Hindu women of the 'condition of Indian women', and its extension to consciousness-raising programmes evolved through personal experiences; the building of separate female institutions; and through women's subcultures - female networks, rituals and interpersonal relationships. Hindu women realised slowly that one of the more important pre-conditions for this was their own access to male spheres of influence, as the latter formed a vital source of support for them.¹ It is also shown here that Hindu women considered Hindu customs and practices as the chief culprits for the low position of woman rather than the religion itself.² Thus, Hindu women's critiques examined women's oppression within Hindu religion, but unlike their Christian contemporaries, did not extend to rejecting it.³

If Hindu women worked within the values promoted by their own menfolk in Maharashtrian society, how did they differ from them? How did they react to the developing ideology of separate spheres?⁴ Was their reaction a homogeneous

¹Many influential female leaders acknowledged their debt to Hindu male reformers, whether their husbands, fathers or brothers. Among those who credited their husbands in educating them were Kashibai Kanitkar, Umabai Kelkar, Ramabai Ranade, Yashodabai Joshi and Anandibai Joshi. On the other hand, Parvatibai Athavale acknowledged the help of her brother-in-law, D.K. Karve and Rakhmabai, her mother and step-father, Jayantibai and Dr. S. Arjun.

²Only a discerning few like Tarabai Shinde or Gangutai Patwardhan traced women's subordination to a kind of male conspiracy.

³Although a few women embraced different reforming sects within Hinduism emerging during the socio-religious upheavals of the time. Ramabai Ranade, Annapurnabai and Shantabai Bhandarkar were Prarthana Samajists, while Anandibai Joshi's views came very close to those of a Brahmo Samajist. Kashibai Kanitkar was a confirmed Theosophist. However, what is important to note here is the fact that their public images corresponded largely to being practising 'Hindus'.

⁴Partha Chatterjee has convincingly argued that early nationalists and reformers created a sharp divide between the inner/outer(corresponding to home/external world) and women increasingly came to be identified with the inner world. In 'Colonialism, nationalism and colonised women: The contest in India', *American Ethnologist*, 16:4, Nov.1989, pp.622-633.

acceptance of this ideology as has been suggested by various scholars?⁵ Did the domestic ideology totally govern notions of 'proper roles' for women or did they step outside it? Did women merely accept the mediating roles created for them by men and acquiesce with their notions of reform? Some historians have argued that the first generation female intelligentsia emerged because male social reformers wanted them to play a mediating role between the separate worlds of male and female.⁶ An attempt is made here to answer these questions by examining the participation of women in these debates. To women, who found the 'domestic ideology' a burdensome one, the most effective weapon was not a total rejection of that ideology but rather a manipulation of its fundamental principles. By examining the separate female institutions developed by women it is shown how they worked within the system yet were able to blur the central public-private divide.

Finally, an attempt is made to examine the nature of Hindu women's consciousness. There were certain common preoccupations among women which served to bind them together. Their perceptions on a range of issues is drawn upon to show the commonalities between them as well as the feminist distinctness of the women's movement. Even though the women's movement emerged from the socio-religious reform movements in the late nineteenth century yet it differed through a conscious woman-centredness. The differing process is examined in the latter half of the chapter under three sections - domestic (family and home) and social reforms; practice of hunda (dowry); and the question of widowhood.

First of all, we will begin with the growth of Hindu women's consciousness and the development of separate female organisations.

⁵Sangari and Vaid have argued that during the colonial period, women internalised 'the offered models' of private/public sphere ideologies, with 'varying degrees of conformity', in their 'Introduction', Recasting women: Essays in colonial history, (New Delhi, 1989), pp.10-15.

⁶Gail Pearson, in particular argues that 'the women of the intelligentsia played a mediating role, first publicly demonstrating their acquiescence with the changes promulgated by male social reformers, then disseminating the reform ideals within the female world.' This rather simplistic and misleading conclusion is challenged in this chapter. See Gail Pearson, 'The female intelligentsia in segregated society - Bombay, A case study', in Michael Allen and S.N. Mukherjee (eds.), Women in India and Nepal, (Canberra, 1982), pp.136-54.

Growth of the women's movement, 1870-1920

The first generation of Hindu female reformers came from the religious reform organisation, the Prarthana Samaj.⁷ Founders of this organisation were influential men, of whom Mahadev Govind Ranade was a key figure. Ranade sought a popular base for the mass acceptance of the Prarthana Samaj by incorporating the principle that social and religious reform could proceed unhindered on different paths and neither of them need involve a sharp break with the past. More significantly, these self-styled 'Hindu protestants' regarded most social institutions, such as widowhood and early marriage, as subject to alteration without affecting the essential character of Hinduism as a religion. Thus they tried to bridge the social gap between the Prarthana Samaj and the general population.⁸ As part of their social reform programmes, male reformers started to educate their wives, sisters and daughters. Women were taught to read and write Marathi in an informal way at home as well as being instructed on science and astronomical matters at the Prarthana Samaj in Bombay.

In the early half of the 1870s around fifty to seventy women would gather in the hall of the Prarthana Samaj every Saturday and listened to lectures given by prominent reformers. They were also taught the art of public speaking here. By 1880s, as the movement grew stronger, women formed their own groups and instructed each other in other towns of Dhulia, Poona, Nasik and Solapur too. While they read the glories of ancient Hindu literature they also heard about the on-going political movements in the West. Kashibai Kanitkar, Rakhmabai, Anandibai Joshi and Ramabai Ranade reveal their admiration and influence of the writings of George Eliot, Jane Austen and Mill's Subjection of Women. Thus the first generation of Hindu female reformers owed a great deal to Hindu male reformers and acknowledged it generously. Autobiographies, prefaces and dedications in novels and plays reveal their tremendous sense of gratitude. Ramabai Ranade's appreciation of her husband bordered on

⁷Prarthana Samaj(Prayer Society) was Western India's original contribution to modern Indian theism. Founded in 1867, its main doctrines were belief in a single, all-powerful, all-loving God, opposition to authority of priests and idolatry and denial of ideas of Karma and transmigration. For details see Heimsath, Indian nationalism and Hindu social reform, (Princeton, 1964), pp.72-112.

⁸Some cultural historians cite this strategy of the Prarthana Samajists as the key to the success of the social reform movement in Western India unlike their counterpart, the Brahmo Samaj which remained exclusive and did not reach the average Bengali. Heimsath, Indian nationalism, pp.104-8.

reverence while Kashibai Kanitkar, in her Preface to her biography of Western India's first female doctor, wrote quite dramatically that even if her skin was used to make footwear for her husband in the next seven lives she would still be in his debt for his contribution in educating her!⁹

A spurt of activity marked the 1880s. Women's networks developed and grew stronger as they shared common interests in social gatherings. Women's feminism was very much a lifestyle in these decades. Conventional social gatherings like kirtans and traditional women's rituals like the halad-kunku were transformed by women in order to convey the new message of female education and to ventilate common problems.¹⁰ Both traditional and reformist women attended these gatherings while astute female leaders took care to cater to the specific beliefs of conservative women in an effort to win their confidence in the new enterprise of female education.¹¹ On several occasions Western women joined these parties too, thus further breaking down some of the prejudices of the orthodox women as well as facilitating the exchange of ideas.¹² The bid to assert their political capacities is seen in the first independent

⁹Kashibai Kanitkar, Sou. Dr. Anandibai Joshi yanche charitra ani patre (Biography and letters of Mrs. Dr. Anandibai Joshi), (Marathi), (Poona, 2nd.ed., 1912), 1st. ed., 1889, n.p; Such overwhelming expressions of gratitude, contrary to what some scholars read as dependence on the part of these women, actually speak volumes about the oppressive atmospheres which surrounded them. It also is a pointer to the differences between Christian and Hindu women. There are no such sentimental expressions of gratitude among the former as we see in the latter. See Chapter One.

¹⁰The halad-kunku ritual was held in Western and Southern Indian homes organised by women and was meant for women only. It probably originated from a desire to relieve themselves of the monotony of household chores but served other purposes too. Exchange of social pleasantries took place along with the opportunity to publicise their daughters' puberty rites, marriage negotiations and announcements of new arrivals in the family. Female reformers like Annapurnabai and Ramabai Ranade added new functions to it by incorporating educational schemes to it. Kirtans were conventional gatherings where learned men and women delivered sermons from religious books or from ancient myths usually accompanied by musical instruments. In Maharashtra, there appears to be a tradition for women to be Kirtankars and this effectively made it easier for women's organisations like the Saraswati Mandir and Seva Sadan to re-align them to suit their own new needs. Sarojini Vaidya, Shrimati Kashibai Kanitkar: Atmacharitra ani charitra (Mrs. Kashibai Kanitkar: Autobiography and biography), (Marathi), (Bombay, 1979), see p.14 for halad-kunku and p. 89 and 177 for kirtans and its new use. Ramabai Ranade, Himself: The autobiography of a Hindu lady, Katherine Gates, (tr.), (New York, 1938), p.116.

¹¹Even minute details like the kind of food and who cooked it and dining arrangements were supervised personally by female reformers due to the notions of pollution attached to them in the nineteenth century.

¹²Ramabai Ranade, Himself, pp.116-17.

women's organisation - the Arya Mahila Samaj.¹³ Even though the founding of the Arya Mahila Samaj was Pandita Ramabai's brainchild, women like Ramabai Ranade and Kashibai Kanitkar worked hard to popularise it among Hindu women. Both of them went canvassing door-to-door in order to persuade women to attend the meetings of the Arya Mahila Samaj. In 1883, with Pandita Ramabai's departure for England, Kashibai Kanitkar became President of its Bombay and Ramabai Ranade of its Poona branch. In the hands of Kashibai and Ramabai, the Arya Mahila Samaj increasingly began to represent Hindu women's needs and aspirations. In some ways Pandita Ramabai, contributed to this process unwittingly not merely by her conversion to Christianity but also on her return to India in 1889, when she diverted all her energies to the building of her institution for women, the Mukti Mission.

While Hindu women gained by the dissociation of Pandita Ramabai's ties with the Arya Mahila Samaj, yet her conversion compounded Hindu women's problems. Maharashtrian women faced a great deal of opposition and hostility from traditional people both from within the home as well as from a viciously anti-woman vernacular press. It was during these tumultuous years that Hindu female reformers developed a strategy for survival by accommodating Hindu views on Indian womanhood - whether orthodox or reformist. Caught in the cross-fire between a hostile press and the obstacles put forward by tradition-bound homes, Hindu female reformers emphasised accommodation and assimilation as part of their bid to retain their newly found freedom and to ensure its continuation. Ramabai Ranade and Parvatibai Athavale's public speeches during this period reveal some of these new anxieties. Addressing a women's gathering at Tasgaon, Ramabai Ranade stressed that the only way to counter the opposition of the public to women's education was to do household work perfectly combining the virtues of obedience and loyalty to the men of the family, while ensuring that her education should not come in the way of her modesty and humility.¹⁴ Parvatibai Athavale went further and strove to accommodate conservative opinion by conforming to many symbols of a good widow. She records in her

¹³Pandita Ramabai, had brought various women's groups under the umbrella organisation of the Arya Mahila Samaj. See Chapter One for details.

¹⁴Ramabai Ranade, Himself, p.105.

autobiography that even though she believed that no widow should cut her hair (referring to the tonsure ceremony) against her will, she herself waited nearly eighteen years before she put into practice what she had preached. As a principal fundraiser for the Hingne Widows' Home, she had been convinced that if she rebelled openly against the traditional symbols of widowhood, her work for the widows' cause would suffer.¹⁵

Acceptance by conservative people was important for the Hindu women's movement. Winning the acquiescence, if not the consent, of elderly women in the in-laws' home was considered a top priority due to their influence in the home. Both letters to the editor of the women's magazines as well as semi-fictional writings of women reveal this overriding concern.¹⁶ New frictions marked Maharashtrian homes with the advent of professionalisation and the growth of the reform movements. If a middle-class Hindu home was divided by reformist sons-in-law and orthodox in-laws, it was women who felt the brunt of these divisions. A young Brahmin widow writing from Satara seeking the advice of the editor of Arya Bhagini is a good illustration of the kind of tensions faced by women whose homes were rife with opposition between the old and the new. She wrote, saying that her maternal uncle and father-in-law were reformists while her mother-in-law was a conservative. Her father-in-law would not let his wife subject his reluctant daughter-in-law to the horrors of the tonsure ceremony. However, her mother-in-law bided her time and waited till the menfolk left to Poona for some business matters. Then she took the opportunity and made the preparations for the ceremony. Her daughter-in-law immediately wrote to her uncle

¹⁵Parvatibai's fundraising activities, which involved touring throughout India, meeting high-ranking officials and prominent members of Indian society, giving public lectures, meant a public image that appeased all sections of indigenous society. Her amazing abilities enabled the Hingne Widows' Home to maintain sixty widows merely through her own fundraising. Parvatibai Athavale, My story: The autobiography of a Hindu widow, Justin Abbott (tr.), (New York, 1930), especially Chapters 7 to 12.

¹⁶Every issue of Arya Bhagini carried a dramatised feature entitled 'Gulabbai ani Shevatibai yancha bodhpar samvad', meaning 'instructive debates between Gulabbai and Shevatibai'. Many of the anxieties regarding women's issues and the opinions of their opponents and its resolutions are enacted in these semi-fictitious debates. Letters by women to the kartri (woman-editor) are also expressive in this regard. See letter dated 26 July 1890 from Majali-Karwar signed by 'Ek kulvadhu' (An upper-class housewife) and letter dated 28 July 1890 from Thana by Champubai Nadkarni, Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Aug. 1890, n.p., Shasakiya Vibhagiya Granthalaya (Government Regional Library) hereafter (SVGP).

informing him of the surreptitious activities which resulted in the girl's uncle rescuing her.¹⁷ Hindu female reformers stressed the role of the housewife in bringing about reconciliation between these warring groups within the home. Kashibai Kirloskar, for example considered accommodation as the most important role of the 'modern' housewife. It was her firm belief that Kashibai Kanitkar's tremendous success in the public arena was because she had learnt this new role of appeasing the old without rejecting the new.¹⁸ Kashibai Kanitkar's biographer mentions that due to the former's shrewd assimilative policy, even a conservative leader like B.G.Tilak who kept an eagle's eye on female leaders would often report in his newspaper, Kesari, on the contrast with Pandita Ramabai.¹⁹ To Kashibai Kirloskar, Kashibai Kanitkar was the ideal Hindu woman, while to the latter, it was Dr. Anandibai Joshi. Interestingly, the reasons cited are similar, namely a deft reconciliation between the old and the new world. To quote Kashibai Kanitkar,

she[Anandibai Joshi] continuously fought the obstacles in her way for the betterment of her **bhaginivarg**[sisterhood]; she reconciled the old and the new views with great foresight, wisdom and conduct; she humoured the new impatient reformers without hurting the feelings of the old; having lived for three years in a totally Christian nation she did not embrace it but preserved one's own customs without offending the foreigners among whom she gained so much. Where men have failed, she succeeded.²⁰

¹⁷The widow's identity was unrevealed as desired by her and the woman-editor published her letter entitled, 'Ek vidhawa mulgi'(A widowed girl), Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), May 1892, pp.34-35, (SVGP).

¹⁸Kashibai Kirloskar, 'Striyanchi kartavya karmen'(Women's duties), Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi) Oct. 1901, p.174, Mumbai Marathi Granthasangrahalaya (Bombay Marathi Records Library), hereafter (MMG).

¹⁹**Kashibai Kanitkar:(1861-1948)** Was born in a wealthy Brahmin family and was married to Govind Vasudev Kanitkar at the age of nine. Had no formal education but learnt to read and write Marathi, Sanskrit and English at home. Extremely well-read, she had mastered many Hindu religious, scientific and historical treatises. She wanted to translate J.S.Mill's, Subjection of Women, which had left a positive impression on her mind. She became a Theosophist to which her husband was violently opposed. She was one of the few Hindu women who believed that women's oppression stemmed from male dominance. She wrote several novels, short stories and essays all of which dealt with women's issues.

²⁰Preface, Biography of Mrs. Dr. Anandibai Joshi (Marathi), n.p.

It is clear that gaining the fruits of modernisation by entering the public arena without jeopardising the older roles was important to Hindu women of this period. A purely pragmatic assessment of the situation led them to adopt a strategy of assimilation and accommodation without creating or adding more hostility from a traditional home or press.

Co-operation with Hindu men of both factions - liberal and conservative - had become a hallmark of Hindu female leaders' ideology. Such an assimilative tendency marked the conduct of the women's organisations opened by women for the welfare of women. The Arya Mahila Samaj was the first organisation to demonstrate an ability to thrive with a proper structure and ideology.²¹ It had two main objectives, namely

- a) To free the gentle women of Bharat from being subjected to blind traditional injustice(viz. child-marriage, dependency due to ignorance and down-right slavery),and
- b) To uplift them from their present regrettable state in religion, and virtue and custom, etc.²²

However, this organisation opened its doors only to women belonging to respectable families and thus inaugurated what was mainly a middle-class women's movement. This institution acted as a platform for women to come together and air their grievances. In the late nineteenth-century, the Arya Mahila Samaj participated in many of the agitations whose main concern was women's welfare.²³

The next wholly Hindu women's organisation was opened in Amravati by a

²¹Many study-groups and several social clubs were already operating under the leadership of various women in the late 1870s of which Ramabai Ranade's Hindu Ladies Social Club is worth mentioning. However, none of them functioned in a stable manner mainly due to a lack of organisational structure. For further details, see Sarojini Vaidya, 'Vegvegli sadye ani pragat marga' (Differing methods and paths of progress), From Ramasmriti (In memory of Ramabai Ranade), (Marathi), (Poona, 1984), p.51, Institutional Collection of Poona Seva Sadan, hereafter (ICPSS).

²²D.G.Vaidya, Prarthana samajacha itihas (The history of Prarthana Samaj) (Marathi), (Bombay, 1950), Appendix III, n.p.

²³The popular participation of women began in the 1890s over the Age of Consent debates under the leadership of various women's organisations. For details, see Chapter Six.

dynamic woman, Yashodabai Joshi.²⁴ In 1892, she inaugurated the Vanita Samaj (Women's Society) with the idea that it should bring together like-minded women. Influenced by Pandita Ramabai and Ramabai Ranade, it is likely that her Vanita Samaj was modelled on the Arya Mahila Samaj of Poona. At first, only kirtans were held to attract women of all shades of opinions (traditional and modern) but soon lectures were organised given by prominent male reformers.²⁵ Discussions were encouraged among women on topics that concerned them, namely education, widowhood and marriage customs.

By 1897, Yashodabai learned more about managerial skills and the Vanita Samaj's programmes grew in scope. Famine committees consisting only of women were formed to work in the famine-stricken districts of Maharashtra. She firmly believed that not enough had been done for the qualitative improvement of women's lives and so the Vanita Samaj incorporated two radical principles - (1), that no daughters of members of the Samaj should be married before the completion of their first degrees; (2), that women should be given a professional education to make them independent. Adult literacy classes for women were held under the auspices of the Samaj.²⁶ Practical knowledge was an important ideal of the Vanita Samaj as recorded in the child-care, nutrition and post-natal care classes for wives and mothers. To make widows' lives bearable and useful she advertised the newly opened D.K.Karve's Anathbalikashram (Orphaned Widows' Home) at Hingne. It is interesting to note here the strategy adopted by Yashodabai when she remained silent about Pandita Ramabai's Widows' Home at Mukti. The Vanita Samaj opened and flourished partly with the approval of Hindu male reformers of Amravati district. Yashodabai and her friends continued to rely on their co-operation for success both in its funding and in trying

²⁴Yashodabai Joshi(1868-1945?): Born in an elite Brahmin family of Abhyankar. Married in 1874 to Vishwanath Moropant Joshi who later became the most popular legal practitioner from Amravati. He was also known for his social reform and nationalist activities. Yashodabai began her education in her in-law's home at the age of seventeen. She is one of the finest examples of a feminist who learnt through experience. Her autobiography, written in 1940, which was not meant for publication is rich in details regarding not only her work for 'women's progress', but also for its fearless critique of contemporary society.

²⁵Yashodabai Joshi, Amchi jivanpravas (Our journey together), (Marathi), (Poona, 1965), p.59.

²⁶Ibid., p.60.

to give it an image of respectability and so to make it popular among women.²⁷

Elsewhere in Maharashtra, the women's movement took root in separate institution building.²⁸ By 1896, three such female institutions were flourishing in Dhulia, Mehekar-Varhad and Solapur.²⁹ Around the turn of the twentieth century, we hear of the activities of another women's organisation in Jalgaon, called Bhagini Mandal (Association of Sisters). Founded by Girijabai Kelkar, it largely catered to the needs of Brahmin women.³⁰ After 1925, it was managed by a keen Maratha woman, Anandibai Shirke, who claimed that only after her arrival did the organisation throw its doors open to other Hindu women like Pathare Prabhus and Marathas.³¹

The women's organisation at Solapur known as Saraswati Mandir (Home of Learning) attests to the importance of separate female institutions in this period. Originally it was conceived as a training ground for the maintenance and continuation of the piety, purity and homely traits in women. Women in this organisation had assumed the role of moral guardians of Indian society. As one spokeswoman explained:

In recent times, our menfolk who have received a western education are extremely critical about our Hindu religion and one can deduce this from their behaviour and general demeanour. Very soon such negative attitudes will reflect on morality which

²⁷In fact, Yashodabai was able to arrange the re-marriage of two widows from her society with the help of prominent male reformers.

²⁸I have found Estelle Freedman's concept of separate institution building useful. See 'Separatism as strategy: Female institution building and American feminism, 1870-1930', 5:3, 1979, Feminist Studies, pp.512-29.

²⁹Details of the Women's Societies of Mehekar-Varhad and Dhulia are scanty though we know that around 250 women were involved in the Women's Sabha of Dhulia under the leadership of Annapurnabai Apte. In Varhad under the leadership of Tulsabai, about 40 to 50 women were involved: Manoramabai Mitra, 'Striyancha unnatisambandhichi prayatna' (Schemes and efforts made in the direction of women's progress), Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi) Aug. 1901, pp.52-59, (MMG).

³⁰**Girijabai Kelkar:** Not much is known about the early and personal life of this remarkable Hindu female leader. All we know is that she had no support from her husband but her mother-in-law sympathised with her aspirations. A prolific writer, she promoted Marathi language and literature. She wrote and lectured profusely on all aspects of women's lives and rights. She was President of the All India Hindu Mahila Parishad in 1935. She held complex views on the nature of women's oppression, some of which are discussed in Chapter Three.

³¹Anandibai Shirke, Sanjvat (The evening lamp), (Marathi), (Bombay, 1972), pp.224-25.

have indeed, already shown signs of lapses...³²

Therefore, the education to be imparted at this institution was to include courses on Hinduism which they hoped would make women spiritually stronger and in turn would act as a good influence on their malefolk. In reality, Saraswati Mandir was a smooth blend of traditional and certain modern ideas. Aside from the fact that it declared itself an all-female institution with an Executive Committee and Steering Committee chaired only by women, it stressed professional education for women in the role of Kathakaar (story tellers), Puranikas (religious scripture-readers) and Kirtankars (hymn singers).³³ Towards this end, they hired the services of the famous Puranika, Anasuyabai Pandita.³⁴ In its Fifth Annual Report, the activities of the institution had incorporated the modern idea of physical exercise for women, providing 'leisure centres for women outside the home' in the form of gardens and parks for women. Two trained teachers from the Poona Female High School were employed whose duties included teaching in the newly started Girls' school as well as conducting adult education classes for older women. The first Kindergarten class in Solapur was started under its supervision.

How did this organisation blend the old and the new without creating ripples in a small town like Solapur? Appeasing the traditionalists was an important strategy for Hindu women. While its founder, Lakshmibai Deshmukh, stressed the importance of education for girls well after puberty and marriage she was also quick to emphasise the acute lack of education on the questions of dharma (traditional concept of religious

³²Parvatibai Degaonkar, 'Shri Saraswati Mandir'(Home of Learning), Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), May 1901, pp.226-28, (MMG).

³³Ibid., p.225.

³⁴**Anasuyabai Pandita:** A contemporary of Pandita Ramabai, she displayed a similar mastery of Sanskrit and a formidable knowledge of Hindu religious scriptures. Exceptionally good at delivering religious discourses, she made a successful living out of it. In the late 1870s and early 1880s, she was much sought after by both orthodoxy and reformers. In her personal life, she had inverted gender roles completely. Her reformist friends record that Anasuyabai thought that she equalled Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram (medieval Maharashtrian poet-saints) and treated her husband with disdain and looked down upon her mother-in-law as a servant. Every morning, her husband and mother-in-law used to bow to her and attend to her whim, the exact reversal of the duties of a traditional Indian wife.

duties) in educational schemes for girls.³⁵ This institution's entire rhetoric in public regarding 'women's welfare', was couched in an easily accessible religious tone.³⁶ The traditional groups of the town were also won over by the Steering Committee's decision to renovate an old disused temple found in the grounds bought by the organisation. The subtlety and astuteness of their methods of negotiating with the larger Hindu male world is seen in their fundraising activities. For example an important guideline for fundraising was to ensure that all donations were made in the names of women only.³⁷ Those women who had no independent income were advised not to urge their menfolk to make donations on behalf of them but to convince them in such a manner as to make the donations in their own names.³⁸ Thus, this particular women's organisation was able to gain enough autonomy in policy-making and decision-taking while it allayed the suspicion of orthodoxy and to a great extent won over its sympathy, too.

Among the separate female institutions, the greatest impact was made on the women's movement in Maharashtra by the Seva Sadan (Mission to the Women of India).³⁹ Under Ramabai Ranade's astute leadership, the Seva Sadan grew to be a premier institution of Western India. Ramabai Ranade played a pioneering role in influencing the Maharashtrian women's movement which took on many hues during

³⁵Editorial, 'Shri Saraswati Mandir: Nibandhmala'(Home of Learning: Collection of essays), Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Oct. 1901, pp.70-71, (MMG).

³⁶Even the choice of a name for the organisation was taken from Hindu scriptures. Shri Saraswati Mandir literally means 'Temple of the Goddess of Learning and Wealth'. The name highlights two revered Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon - Shri or Lakshmi(goddess of wealth) and Saraswati(goddess of learning).

³⁷It is not stated why there was such a resolution but it may be surmised from the all-female management that if large donations came from men then some of the policy decisions would necessarily be made by men.

³⁸Parvatibai Degaonkar, 'Shri Saraswati Mandir' (Home of Learning), Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), May 1901, pp.228-29, MMG.

³⁹Seva Sadan literally means 'Social Welfare and Service Society'. The 'Mission to the Women of India' seems more apt as this was how the Society's members described it officially and it appears to be a more appropriate commentary on their overall objectives and work.

the first two decades of the twentieth century.⁴⁰ The idea of founding an organisation to help adult women, especially deserted women and widows, was already forming in her mind as was revealed in her speech as the President of the All India Women's Meeting held in Bombay in 1904.⁴¹ The opportunity to do so was presented to her when Dayaram Gidumal, a wealthy businessman and reformer, requested her to take over the Seva Sadan at Bombay in 1908. Before her involvement in the Seva Sadan, the original planners (mainly G.K.Gokhale and G.K.Deodhar) had intended to train poor women as social workers geared towards national service in the same manner as men were being trained in the Servants of India Society. But later, under Ramabai Ranade and forty other women it developed on completely different lines. Instead of a nationalist programme the Seva Sadan's objectives were 'providing a varied scheme of Adult Women's Education and a professional training or vocational education for adult women' taking into consideration the 'wants of grown-up women'.⁴²

The Seva Sadan established in Poona on 2 October 1909, started with six female students in the very first month and reported an increase by two hundred and sixty by 1910, while by the end of 1920, it rose rapidly to over a thousand.⁴³ Between 1909 and 1920, the immense popularity it gained led the management to open eight other branches in urban areas of Maharashtra.⁴⁴ The Seva Sadan was managed and controlled entirely by a council of twenty women and was assisted by

⁴⁰**Ramabai Ranade: (1862-1924)** Married to Mahadeo Govind Ranade, an extremely influential reformer of nineteenth century India, Ramabai Ranade's potential as an original thinker and activist was realised only after the death of her husband in 1901. Among her contributions three deserve special mention. She started a movement for the compulsory education of girls in Maharashtra; campaigned successfully for voting rights of Indian women as well as for representation in the Legislative Council; protested against the indentured system of labour in British colonies. Her liberal politics was probably the key to her extraordinary success in most of her campaigns.

⁴¹Indirabai Deodhar, 'Progress of Indian women', Diamond Jubilee Souvenir, Poona Seva Sadan Society, 1909-1969, (Poona, 1970), p.19, (ICPSS).

⁴²Silver Jubilee Album of the Seva Sadan Society containing Review and Report of the varied activities of the Society at its headquarters in Poona and at its outside branches, 1935, (Poona, 1936), pp.19, 34-35, hereafter Silver Jubilee Album, (ICPSS).

⁴³Extracts of various annual reports of Seva Sadan in Mahratta, 16 Oct. 1909, p.496, and 25 May 1913, p.165.

⁴⁴These were at Satara, Solapur, Ahmednagar, Nasik, Alibag, Girgaum, Bhamburda and Bombay. Silver Jubilee Album, p.39, (ICPSS).

a 'Gentlemen's Helpers' Committee' consisting of eight leading men from Poona.⁴⁵ It is interesting that it was the exact reverse in the founding of the Poona Girls' High School by male reformers in 1885.⁴⁶ Its staff consisted of forty female teachers on regular salaries while its initial funding was provided by donations from elite Hindu circles, mainly women belonging to the Hindu aristocracy.⁴⁷

The Seva Sadan pioneered several areas of work for women. An extremely important change from other Hindu women's organisations was its programmes for the welfare of working class women. The Seva Sadan recognised the need for working class women to work outside the home. The first Women's Co-operative in Western India was started by the Seva Sadan. It made a modest beginning by starting domestic or cottage industries like papad, pickle-making, cane-work, basket weaving and toy-making.⁴⁸ In 1911, the management reported that 40% of the students were from very poor families and were eager to earn a decent livelihood, while another 35% came from families of modest means, who were interested in bettering their circumstances.⁴⁹ Creches and Infant Welfare Centres were opened in several towns in the hope that working class mothers would benefit.⁵⁰ Even though the Seva Sadan worked consistently for the welfare of working-class women it still represented a middle-class movement. Almost every woman on its Managing Committee was drawn from the professional Brahmin families of Maharashtra.

Nursing was made for the first time in Western India a socially acceptable and

⁴⁵Mahratta, 16 Oct.1909, p.496.

⁴⁶Ramabai Ranade was one of the 'female helpers' of this school in which women leaders had no role in the actual management of the school. For details see Chapter Five.

⁴⁷The President of the Society was the Ranisaheb(Princess) of Sangli, Lady Sarasvatibai Patwardhan, and of the six Vice-Presidents, three were princesses of the Indian princely states of Jath, Jamkhandi and Kolhapur. Silver Jubilee Album, p.3.

⁴⁸Four women who led the programme were Tarabai Patwardhan, Malathibai Gharpure, Bhinabai Lele and Indirabai Deodhar. ibid., pp.27-28.

⁴⁹Mahratta, 25 May 1913, p.165.

⁵⁰For example, the creches run by the Seva Sadan in Solapur could accommodate 300 infants and were meant solely for the children of women working in the various mills. Silver Jubilee Album, p.12, (ICPSS).

even respectable profession for high-caste Hindu women.⁵¹ Besides nursing, women were also trained to be doctors, health visitors and midwives. Short term courses on subjects such as First Aid and Hygiene and Home Nursing, Sanitation and Health were popularised by conducting examinations and awarding 'Certificates of Proficiency'. On average, twenty-five nurses were trained annually and two hostels were specially built to accommodate trainee nurses.⁵² Ramabai Ranade and her female staff are reported to have used painstaking methods to break down the prejudices against medical work by women.⁵³ Indirabai Deodhar, a colleague of Ramabai Ranade, attributed part of this success to the great respect that Ramabai Ranade personally commanded in Maharashtra. She had built up an impeccable public image as an exemplary wife and daughter-in-law. Even though her image helped the more unusual programmes of her institution, yet the main reason for her success lay in her extremely ingenious manipulation of the contemporary discourse on motherhood. Like Gandhi, she was extremely skilful in the use of traditional Indian notions of 'duty' and 'motherhood' to convey a modern idea.⁵⁴ 'Ideal motherhood' to her was not necessarily bearing and looking after children well but a general concept of love for others and service to society. In this context, she defined 'motherhood' not as a duty but as 'women's chief right'.⁵⁵ Also, such a 'right', she carefully noted, was a unique power that only the female sex was endowed with, to be harnessed in the interests of societal welfare. She encouraged female nurses in the Sassoon Hospital who hesitated to touch male patients, by asking them to consider all male patients as their fathers

⁵¹Due to the nature of the profession, nursing was associated by Hindus with notions of pollution and hence had been a stigmatised occupation considered fit only for Christians or lower-caste Hindus.

⁵²'Visitor's Remarks', from Silver Jubilee Album, p.35, (ICPSS).

⁵³Parents or guardians of students eager to train in medical work were personally visited by the staff to convince and assure them. ibid., pp.35, 47.

⁵⁴Gandhi made use of traditional Indian symbols to convey a contemporary socio-political message to women. See Madhu Kishwar, 'Gandhi on Women', Part I, Economic and Political Weekly, 5 Oct. 1985, pp.1691-1702.

⁵⁵Umakant, Kai Shri Ramabai Ranade (The Great Ramabai Ranade), (Marathi), (Bombay, 1925), pp.110-11.

or brothers and spoke of nursing as a 'sacred duty'.⁵⁶ Moreover, caring for the sick and needy was invested with godliness, a theme easily understood by Hindus.⁵⁷ Thus, Ramabai Ranade was able to reconcile medical professions for women with conservative opinion.

The nature of the medical work in Seva Sadan won over differing political ideologies of the time. The public health policy adopted by the institution made sure that besides curative methods, practical methods of preventive medicine were taught too. This meant free advice to expectant and parturient mothers on matters of feeding and care of sick infants at various maternity homes, dispensaries and hospitals. 'Annual Baby Competitions and Children's Week', an entirely novel concept, was introduced while poor women were assisted with supplies of milk, clothing and medicine. Such a varied programme attracted Indian eugenists, nationalists and the colonial elite, too.

The Seva Sadan, like the other women's organisations, was wholly committed to the ideology of social reform before political reform. They were guided by the idea that the cause of Indian womanhood had hope as long as social reform programmes were at the centre of public attention. Their worries were genuine in the wake of the long-drawn out struggle between Indian male leaders (in Maharashtra exemplified by the Gokhale-versus-Tilak controversy) pulling in different directions, one advocating social reform and the other political reform. Some far-sighted women's journals, while expressing their anxiety over this issue urged Ramabai Ranade to take on the mantle of leadership. Manorama Mitra, a female editor, wrote that,

when the widow's interests and the woman's cause is being shoved in the corner by male leaders it is imperative for leaders like Mrs. Ramabai Ranade to take the lead

⁵⁶Indirabai Deodhar, 'This I remember', Silver Jubilee Album, p.33, (ICPSS).

⁵⁷Some scholars have incorrectly seen Ramabai Ranade as an embodiment of patriarchal values, who propagated that the 'ultimate fulfilment of a woman's life' was in her 'life-long commitment to her husband's welfare'. Such a reading seems to have been based on a simplistic analysis of Ramabai's public utterances without any consideration of her various activities. Meerabai Kosambi, 'Women, emancipation and equality: Pandita Ramabai's contribution to women's cause', Economic and Political Weekly, 29 Oct.1988, WS-46.

in this sphere.⁵⁸

Some of the older women's organisations like the Shri Saraswati Mandir also echoed these sentiments as early as 1901.⁵⁹ Their fears about men neglecting the women's cause were well-founded as was revealed in the lip-service paid by the Indian National Congress to women's rights issues when the nationalist programme unfolded in the 1930s and 40s.

What is significant here is that women's organisations took care to establish guidelines for their programmes of action. The Seva Sadan, for example, identified itself as an organisation which mainly served the interests of Indian womanhood and in times of crises (like famines) it followed a programme based on humanitarian principles. Any programme which had political overtones was discouraged and members were forced to respect these regulations. By 1915, dissension rose among its members regarding these restrictions.⁶⁰ A failure of the early twentieth century female institutions was their neglect of the aspirations of women as political beings. More significant was their failure to critically evaluate and comprehend the early Congress's rhetoric and Gandhi's propaganda on the inclusion of women's programmes in nationalist discourse. Thus, disgruntled members who, for example, wanted to participate in the Congress movement for women's representation in Legislative Councils (which they rightly interpreted as a woman's cause) were thwarted by the Seva Sadan without a reasonable explanation.⁶¹ A large number of women who had been committed to these separate female institutions defected after 1920, with the death of Ramabai Ranade, to the popular call of the Congress.

Having detailed the ideology and separate institution building under influential Hindu female leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, we will now

⁵⁸Editorial, 'Mahilecha uddhar' (Women's welfare), Maharashtra Mahila, Aug.1902, p.68.

⁵⁹Editorial, 'Mahileche uddhar' (Women's welfare), ibid., May 1901, p.197.

⁶⁰Women like Indirabai Deodhar, who wanted to join the nationalist programmes of Swadeshi were dissuaded and bitterly criticised by the Managing Committee. 'This I remember', Silver Jubilee Album, pp.30-31, (ICPSS).

⁶¹Ibid., p.37.

consider the course of the broader women's movement as it evolved over debates on education, marriage and widowhood. Also, a better estimate of the importance of the above institutions can be made by an understanding of the beliefs and opinions of Maharashtrian women from whose ranks came the members of these women's organisations.

Debates between 'traditionalist' and 'progressive' women on female education

In late nineteenth-century Maharashtra a movement for the education of women gathered momentum among Western-educated Indian men as seen in the controversy over and the establishment of, the Poona Girl's High School.⁶² It came to occupy a prominent place on women's agendas too. This development seems to be unique to Maharashtra during this period.⁶³ Among a spectrum of opinions there seem to emerge two factions whose shades of meaning correspond closely to what I will refer to as 'traditionalist' and 'progressive'.⁶⁴ The rift was expressed in respect to three issues - the objectives of female education, the curriculum, and the occupations suitable for educated women. These areas of conflict primarily arose from physiological or biological theories of difference between the sexes.

Primary education for girls was welcomed by both 'traditional' and 'progressive' women. A commonality of interest bound them together in this project. Many instances of women being taken to colonial courts for crimes ranging from administering love-potions to indifferent husbands (which were actually poisonous substances), hiding children from vaccinators and branding recalcitrant children for not

⁶²See Chapter Five for male reformers' efforts to gain control over educational enterprises for women.

⁶³Scholars have shown how even the more independent-minded among Punjabi and Bengali women during the same period could not break free from the ideological straitjacket of the male intelligentsia. Madhu Kishwar, 'Arya Samaj and women's education: Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar', Economic and Political Weekly, 26 Apr. 1986, WS-9-WS-24; Malavika Karlekar, 'Kadambini and the bhadralok: Early debates over women's education in Bengal', Economic and Political Weekly, 26 Apr. 1986, WS-25-WS-31.

⁶⁴Two prominent leaders, Ramabai Ranade and Kashibai Kanitkar illustrate the existence of two 'camps' within the women's movement. Ramabai Ranade, Ranade: His wife's reminiscences, Kusumavati Deshpande, (tr.), (New Delhi, 1963), p.105, Sarojini Vaidya, Mrs. Kashibai Kanitkar, p.80.

attending school were reported by educated women.⁶⁵ Such cases were studied and attributed to the utter ignorance of many women. The editor of a women's journal pointed out the importance of educating women out of their superstition when she gave the particulars of a case involving a Maratha woman who faced capital punishment for having sacrificed her neighbour's child on the counsel of a wandering mendicant. He had told her that this was the only way she could get rid of the ghost of her mother-in-law who tormented her every night!⁶⁶ That women through their superstitious conduct added to their miseries made the more articulate leaders address themselves to the question of education.

Another area of agreement was over the need to reform conjugal relations. Both 'traditional' and 'progressive' wives felt the strain in marital relations. They traced it to the growth of a professional class in Maharashtra under British rule whose ideas had undergone transformation due to Western contact. Such fears were succinctly articulated by a middle-class housewife who argued for education on the ground that:

Due to lack of education among women, it has resulted in compartmentalising the thoughts of illiterate wives and educated husbands. It has brought a rift between the thought processes of men and women.⁶⁷

Both 'traditional' and 'progressive' women argued that women's progress was intertwined with that of the nation, but did so by quoting different reasons depending on their beliefs. The 'traditionalists' constantly complained about the precarious nature of their family's financial condition due to the meagre earnings of their husbands or fathers in service professions. Many of the women's journals had a separate section

⁶⁵Manoramabai Mitra, 'Naval vishesh' (Special news), Maharashtra Mahila, Apr. 1901, p.174, (MMG) ; Anon., 'Mulana devi kadnyachi avashyakata' (The necessity of vaccination for children), ibid, Apr. 1901, pp.170-73, (MMG).

⁶⁶'Mahilechi uddhar' (Women's welfare), Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Mar. 1901, pp.98-99, (MMG).

⁶⁷Anon., 'Eka Brahman striyen stri shikshanavar vyakhyana' (A Brahmin woman's essay on women's education), Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Feb. 1891, p.20, (SVGP).

for articles on kaat-kasar (economy), such was the pre-occupation of middle-class women trying to make ends meet on a salaried income. The 'traditionalists' who argued for an education for women thus made good household management an all-consuming goal of a girl's learning. For instance, Krishnabai Malvadkar, who edited a women's magazine, said:

People have been defining women's education in ways that suit them, but considering the present-day situation of women, I interpret the word education as follows, 'Learn everything which is necessary for the efficient maintenance of a household', which means learning to read and write Marathi,... and any skill that contributes to domestic matters.⁶⁸

If girls were taught to read and write they would begin to derive pleasure from reading which would divert their attention from craving and nagging their husbands for material goods. Instead, with an education which taught them good household management they would learn skills of thrift and add to the savings of the home and eventually to that of the nation.⁶⁹ Those who leaned towards 'progressive' opinion argued that if women went into areas of 'seva' (service) like medicine and teaching they would be of greater utility to the nation.⁷⁰

It was, however, the question of a suitable curriculum for the education of girls that demarcated a sharp difference between what can be broadly described as the 'traditional' and the 'progressive'. The former believed that physiological differences existed between the two sexes which defined separate spheres of activity for men and women. Such theories of difference do not appear to emanate from any reading of contemporary Western scientific discourse but from observing the world around them. The argument was that if a woman's role was one of nurturance then the content of

⁶⁸Simantini, (Marathi), Aug. 1893, pp.1-3, (MMG).

⁶⁹Radhabai Sheti, 'Stri shikshana sambandhi matbhed' (Difference of opinions on women's education), Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Aug. 1890, p.96, (SVGP) ; Anandibai Prabhu Desai, 'Striyas uttam shikshan kontha?', Bhag Dusra' (Which is the most appropriate curriculum for women?, Part Two), Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Sept. 1901, pp.122-23, (MMG).

⁷⁰Tulsabai's lecture on the utility of women's education reported in 'Schemes and efforts made in the direction of women's progress', Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Aug. 1901, p.53, (MMG).

her education had to concentrate on helping her in household management and aspects of nursing the elderly and the proper care of children.⁷¹ 'Traditionalists' also believed that education for women could be successfully imparted only at home.

Defeminisation of girls was another issue among 'traditional' women which prompted them to advocate a separate curriculum in girls' schools. Such a belief came from two sources - firstly, their views on the nature of men and secondly, on what they presumed had happened to Western women after the latter's equal education on par with men. For instance, Girijabai Kelkar argued that men were 'individualist, selfish and aggressive' and these qualities were encouraged in them by higher education which taught them to compete against each other.⁷² In the West, according to her, the equal rights campaign had led women to become like men. Her views are not peculiar to her alone, but seem to have been circulated widely by the colonial elite, especially Englishmen in the Indian Medical Service who had come under the influence of eugenic theories.⁷³ In her view, 'become like men' meant that Western women's 'natural tenderness and soft nature is replaced by individualism, hatred and harshness', along with the 'avoidance of maternal responsibilities'.⁷⁴ During this period women celebrated femininity. The unique female identity of being childbearers, childrearers, as well as the moral and spiritual guardians of society made them feel that in many ways they were superior to men.

However, 'traditionalists' did not rule out a professional education for women entirely. They linked it to economic necessity and seva. This seems to be a definite departure from the views of conservatives who made no such concessions. According to this belief, only lower-class women and widows had to equip themselves with a

⁷¹Radhabai, 'Difference of opinions', Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Aug. 1890, pp.90-96, (SVGP).

⁷²Girijabai Kelkar, 'Hindu samajatil strishikshanache pudil dyaya' (The aims of education of women in Hindu society), Pushpahar (Garland of flowers), (Marathi), (Jalgaon, 1921), pp.10-17.

⁷³Dr.M.S.Pembrey argued that, 'the possession of a baby is more valuable to the State than a first-class Certificate in Classics', Mahratta, 31 Aug. 1913; also the views of Dr. Pollen, ibid., 3 Aug. 1913.

⁷⁴Girijabai, 'The aims of education', Pushpahar, p.14.

profession as their survival demanded it.⁷⁵ Upper-class women had more leisure-time as they had domestic help, therefore they were advised to study further and enter the public arena to serve their sisters. There was a general belief among women that the female sex was endowed with finer sensibilities and a literary profession was often recommended for upper-class women who were not burdened by problems of household work.⁷⁶ Even though 'traditionalist' thinking among women did not advocate higher education on the basis of notions of 'equal rights' yet their categories of 'need' and 'social welfare' left room for a broader interpretation and gradually came to include middle-class women too.⁷⁷ The success of an institution like the Seva Sadan was also due to its rhetoric of 'want', and 'mission', which were not offensive to 'progressive' women but definitely appealing to 'traditionalist' women.

On the other hand, 'progressive' women were of the opinion that no significant differences existed between male and female, hence the curriculum had to be similar, gearing them for some sort of professional training. There was a general consensus regarding the necessity of training women in midwifery, nursing and teaching. Some women like Vithabai Chaudhari went further and insisted that until lady doctors emerge midwives should be taught the treatment of women's diseases and surgery.⁷⁸ However, it was only at the turn of the century that women expressed the need for a professional education on grounds of individuality and creativity. In 1901, Tulsabai, a Maratha female leader of the Mehekar-Varhad's women's organisation,

⁷⁵Ibid., p.17.

⁷⁶Anon., 'Garib, madhyam, va shrimant striyani apaplya yogyate pramane upayogi asave' (Appropriate occupations for lower, middle and upper-class women), Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Apr. 1890, pp.33-34, (SVGP) ; Anandibai Prabhu Desai, 'Which is the most appropriate curriculum for women?', Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Sept. 1901, pp.122-28, (MMG).

⁷⁷Middle-class families did not appear to have financial stability during this period, based as they were on mainly service-professions. Umabai Kelkar, Anandibai Shirke, Anandibai Karve and others have left memoirs describing the precarious nature of their husbands' job-situations, which further strengthened their determination to seek a professional education. See also the following chapter for details.

⁷⁸Vithabai Chaudhari: Born in a Brahmin family of Poona in 1850, she was educated by her father against the wishes of her mother and grandmother. She trained to be a teacher and knew five languages. She met Mary Carpenter and was inspired by her. She served in various towns of Bombay Presidency as a Headmistress of Girls' schools. She believed that female teachers laboured under various disadvantages and ought to be given more incentives than male teachers.

while praising the efforts of women in educating themselves on a self-help basis and imparting the same to their children, urged them to go beyond the roles of being better wives and efficient mothers. She said, 'Education leads to fame, honour and respect in society. The time has come for women to gain these three fruits of education too.'⁷⁹

Initiative, enterprise, and ambition were advocated as praiseworthy virtues among women. Images of heroines from the past were used to validate the emergence of women in the public world, a subject dealt with in detail in the last section of this chapter. By 1900, while women were entering the public sphere, there was a growing prejudice among Indian men against women training for a profession. The argument was that women and power were incompatible and that every time a woman claimed public power she lost her feminine qualities and turned into a heartless tyrant. The most popular example was that of the notorious Anandibai of the Peshwa period. Male prejudice and hostility towards the professional entry of women were challenged by women at several levels. They attempted to glorify qualities of initiative, assertion and ambition by imbuing local and recognisable heroines from India's immediate past with the kinds of positive traits which the modern Maharashtrian woman was aspiring to emulate. For example, one woman wrote a rejoinder to a article written by a man against higher education for women published in a Poona newspaper, Karmanook arguing:

The saintly Ahilyabai Holkar took on the role of the protector of her subjects and proved to be a true patriot. Donning the robes of a warrior, Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi, fought on the battlefield and died for her country. Krishnakumari faced a brave death for the sake of her family. So also Joan of Arc and one can give countless examples of brave, good and ambitious women. My opinion is that ambition is a positive trait. ... If we take the example of men alone, was not Shivaji an ambitious man? Was it a heinous crime for him to have built and defended the country of Maharashtra? ... Thus it is unwarranted and irresponsible to argue that

⁷⁹Manoramabai Mitra, 'Schemes and efforts', Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Aug. 1901, pp.53-54, (MMG).

ambition is a negative quality amongst women alone.⁸⁰

Discussion, dialogue and criticism were identified as vital areas of education which were lacking in women's experience and many of them were convinced that unless there was equal educational opportunities for women there was no hope for the social reform movement itself. Further, many women of the 'progressive' strand of thought argued for higher education for women on the grounds that unless a woman attained a sufficiently advanced level of critical reading no one could convince her of the efficacy of letting her own daughter remain in school after the age of twelve. With a scientific education alone, it was believed that women would discern the advantages of adult, instead of child marriages.⁸¹

The earliest signs of a radical feminist consciousness can be traced to the 1880s when Christian women like Mary Sorabji entered the professional field of teaching.⁸² Hindu women like Anandibai Joshi and Rakhmabai recorded the deep animosity of men in the medical field which forced them to seek a medical education outside the country.⁸³ However, it was at the turn of the century that women began to make full use of their education for a living on a larger scale. Separate female institutions like Seva Sadan made the task of women easier with their respectable public image. Seva Sadan had also made arrangements for married women who desired a professional education and who did not have the willing consent of their husbands.⁸⁴ Maharashtrian women not only faced hostility from indigenous critics but

⁸⁰Rumi Killedar, 'Strivargavar khota arop' (False accusations against women), *ibid.*, Sept. 1901, pp.110-11.

⁸¹Sagunabai Dev's speech reported in 'Schemes and efforts' *ibid.*, Jul. 1901, p.12; Tarabai Nabar, 'Bal vivahache dushparinam' (Evil effects of child-marriage), *ibid.*, May 1901, pp.234-36.

⁸²For details see chapters One and Five.

⁸³Anandibai faced immense pressure from outraged men so she made a public statement regarding her decision to seek an education outside India. Anandibai Joshi, A speech by a Hindu lady, (Bombay, 1882). Rakhmabai received death threats after her legal action against her husband, over the restitution of conjugal rights, and these convinced her to pursue a medical education in London. Mohini Varde, Dr.Rakhmabai: Ek arth (Saga of Dr.Rakhmabai), (Marathi), (Bombay, 1982), pp.101-2.

⁸⁴Reports of the Seva Sadan show that eighteen such women were being trained in several professions. Silver Jubilee Album, p.38, (ICPSS).

also from the colonial authorities. A good example of this is Cornelia Sorabji's long drawn tussle with the legal profession. By the 1910s Maharashtrian women faced stiff opposition from colonial women, too, in the area of medicine and appointments in educational services. British women who had faced a great deal of sexist opposition in England in the field of medicine had slowly moved to the colonies, especially India owing to the new spate of interest shown in 'native women's health' and with the creation of the Dufferin Fund.⁸⁵ At the core of this issue were economic motivations tinged with racial overtones and educated Maharashtrian women for the first time faced a double-edged hostility from European women and Indian men.⁸⁶

A great deal of friction was generated between reformist Indian men and Maharashtrian women over the allocation of administrative posts in the educational department. In 1900 in the city of Bombay all the girls' schools in the Marathi, Urdu and Gujarati medium run by the Municipality were supervised by male inspectors. When a suggestion was made by a member of the Corporation regarding the replacement of male by female inspectors, the proposal was vetoed by a large number of municipal councillors. The reasons offered were that there was a great paucity of qualified women and that women can never be as efficient administrators as men.

Such attitudes were interpreted by women as arising out of male jealousy and hostility. It was indeed the beginning of a contentious debate between men and the urban educated female intelligentsia. Women combated the accusations in many scathing attacks. An editorial in a leading women's journal summarised the opinions of 'progressive' women on the question:

The real reason why women are not given such responsible jobs is due to the male sex's desire to reserve the entire job sector for themselves. They are further made bold, to jealously guard it by the powerlessness of women to change the

⁸⁵Some of the issues of medical aid to Bengali women in the early part of twentieth century have been discussed in detail recently: e.g., Dagmar Engels, 'The changing role of women in Bengal, c.1890 - c.1930: with special reference to the British and Bengali discourses on sexuality', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 1988, University of London.

⁸⁶See Chapter Five for more details.

situation.⁸⁷

Women used this opportunity to bring into the open their grievances over sex-based discriminatory practices - lower scales of salaries for women, incentives, transfers, and poorer working conditions. Their argument hinged on the fact that the inability to carry out important tasks was not due to any inherent inefficiency among women but to meagre salaries and ill-treatment of women in work-places. In the words of Manoramabai Mitra:

Why should women take the responsibility of arduous jobs on a beggarly salary of Rs.15 or 20? Instead of questioning unequal scales of pay, men turn around and heap false accusations of incapability on women ... If they want to attract women to serve the cause of education they have to pay bigger salaries, hold out incentives and treat them with respect, honour and dignity just as men who serve in these capacities.⁸⁸

Finally, a question arises as to why women did not agitate for entry into the all-male arena of clerical employment. The early twentieth century marks the first phase of women's entry into professional arenas. Their marked preference for the teaching and medical professions gave them the necessary financial and social status to combat male opposition in a more effective manner. It was not just the argument that only female doctors could have access to female patients and only female teachers were acceptable in segregated female institutions. The first female doctors like Rakhmabai and Anandibai Joshi and the earliest set of midwives, were to some extent, insulated from the criticisms of mainstream Hindu society when they scaled the social ladder by treating female members of aristocratic families who gave them patronage.⁸⁹ Many female teachers were reported to have preferred jobs in

⁸⁷Editorial, 'Women's welfare', Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Aug. 1901, p.49, (MMG).

⁸⁸Ibid., p.50.

⁸⁹Anandibai Joshi for example, had signed a contract to serve as the Chief Physician on a monthly salary of Rs.500 in Kolhapur. On this occasion she appeased her orthodox mother-in-law by promising to accommodate her with separate dining arrangements and agreed to finance the medical education of her brother-in-law. Rakhmabai mixed with the princely family of Baroda.

government schools rather than in welfare institutions because of the higher salaries and greater benefits like housing.⁹⁰ Thus women were equally susceptible to aspirations to power and class when it came to professions. The additional advantage of such professions was that they gave them the much needed protection that financial security and social standing brought.

Domestic reforms and social reform

The question why Indian men were interested in social reform has been asked many times and many explanations have been offered. Scholarly studies have suggested that the Orientalist's creation of a 'Golden Age' in the Hindu past, the threat posed by alien religion, attempt to reclaim political power over the country, were the prime factors that moved nineteenth-century Indians to initiate reforms.⁹¹ In this section an attempt is made to understand why the nineteenth-century Maharashtrian woman worked towards reform.

Unlike the male discourse on social reform, among women the urge to bring about changes in the home and in society evolved entirely out of a desire to redress the unequal marital relationship, to bring more respect and dignity to the life of a female and to lessen the miserable condition of the child-wife and the widow. Their views can be traced mainly to their personal experiences which had led them to reflect on the 'condition of Indian women'.⁹² Even among the most conservative women there was a growing awareness of the changed material conditions due to colonial rule and their discussion of reform itself incorporated the economic realities of their

Midwives like Anandibai Shirke and Umabai Kelkar built lucrative private practices by treating aristocratic women and thus silenced opposition within their own homes.

⁹⁰Parvatibai Athavale, My story, p.144.

⁹¹Among them see Heimsath, Indian nationalism, and more recently Kenneth Jones, Socio-religious reform movements.

⁹²Two brilliant examples of the growth of feminist consciousness among women based entirely on experience are Yashodabai Joshi and Gangutai Patwardhan. In their autobiographies, they record how sexual harassment, the battering of their mothers-in-law and the harsh lives of their own sisters or friends gradually turned them towards the issue of women's oppression. Yashodabai Joshi, Our journey together, (Marathi) and Gangutai Patwardhan, Chakoribaher: Ek atmakathan (Beyond the courtyard: An autobiography), (Marathi), (Poona, 1974).

existence and was directly situated in the material reality of their times.

The low status occupied by the stri-jati (female sex) in society was traced by them to the economic burden women were seen to represent to the family.⁹³ In the light of the fact that women were not earning salaried incomes and household work was unrecognised and unpaid, women realised that girls were treated as a liability. Hunda (dowry) and khandani (exactions made by priestly class during marriages) were primarily responsible for the lack of enthusiasm in bringing up a female child and in the mistreatment that they faced, sometimes in the natal home and more often in the marital home. In the words of Kanthabai Tarkhadkar:

And it is because of this if a daughter is born in any family, the head of the family is instantly dejected and immensely displeased. Because our Aryan people do not yet know that women are equally capable of doing hard labour just like men.⁹⁴

The priestly class was held responsible for many of the ills affecting women's lives. Due to the exorbitant amount of money spent on weddings, which lasted for a couple of weeks and involved countless rituals, priests extracted as much money and gifts in kind as possible from the family of the bride. This made the rearing of a girl extremely expensive and led to female infanticide and maltreatment of female children. The custom of consulting horoscopes and relying on the words of astrologers was condemned as a false science.⁹⁵ Women were warned that Hindu astrologers were deceivers, who lessened the chances of a female child's happiness as priests who often acted as astrologers were given absolute power in deciding if a girl was born under a lucky star or not.⁹⁶

⁹³'Stri-jati' a term employed very often by female writers of the period literally means 'caste of women'. However, the term can be more accurately translated as 'female-sex', in the various contexts in which women employ the term. For example, it is used to contrast the lives of 'purush-jati' (male sex) in treatises or articles that theorise about the 'condition of women'.

⁹⁴Kanthabai Tarkhadkar, 'Striyanchi sthiti, lagnatil khandani va Bhat mandalicha paise upatnyacha thata' (The condition of women, Punitive exactions of the priestly class during marriages and their methods of extraction), Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), May 1892, pp.36-39, (SVGP).

⁹⁵Manakbai Lad, 'Jyotish ani shakun' (Astrologers and omens), ibid., Jul. 1891, pp.57-59.

⁹⁶Ibid., pp.57-58.

Again, it was the priests who were blamed for encouraging polygamy among Hindus. Women were convinced that it was due to the cunning mediation of the priests who saw immense profits in getting a man to marry three or four wives that women were suffering the miserable status of co-wives. The exactions of marriage expenses were also considered to be the main obstacles in the education of girls. Their analysis crossed class barriers, too, because they felt that it was not only upper or middle-class women who were the victims of such customs, but also the lower classes. The plight of a Kunbi farmer was often quoted as one of eternal bondage. A Kunbi might not have to pay as much money to priests during a daughter's wedding as an upper-class man, yet the burden of even a small debt drove him from the comforts of his native home to industrial towns like that of Bombay. Thus women writing on matters of reform concluded that the priestly class was worse than the usurious marwari (money-lender) because even though the marwari charged high rates of interest the loans were actually incurred in the first place to feed the priests.⁹⁷

Gender was foremost in female commentaries on reform even though they were constantly aware of class factors. This was a major difference between the female and the male debate on the social reform movement. Both domestic and marriage reforms were advocated not as part of a 'civilising mission' as was the case with men but because they were seen as a crucial means of diverting resources to the education of women or lessening the suffering of women.

First of all, women addressed themselves directly to the question of their own position in the reform movement. Many of them held the view that they were the 'custodians of Hindu culture'. They, therefore argued for the need to examine the propriety of all customs, rituals and ceremonies within the home: only then could they weed out what was harmful, retain the good, and make necessary innovations. Women thus put themselves in the forefront of redefining 'custom', 'morality' and 'tradition' and for creating a new style of living and behaviour.⁹⁸

Among domestic reforms women's rituals and rites surrounding birth, puberty

⁹⁷Ibid., p.36-38.

⁹⁸Editorial, Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), May 1901, p.13, (MMG); Also Sundarabai Shirur's speech at the second social conference of Bombay Presidency, reported in 'Schemes and efforts', ibid., Oct. 1901, p.156.

and pregnancy were given a searching examination and reforms were called for to make them less expensive while retaining their original utility. Graphic details of how many families ended in debt, losing property in mortgages due to the custom of spending lavishly on puberty and pregnancy rites were written to spread awareness of the final ruination which resulted from such blind beliefs. They were equally aware of the fact that it was women themselves who gave currency to meaningless customs in the belief that they were upholding tradition. One woman protagonist gave a detailed picture of the rites relating to a girl on attaining puberty. She wrote that:

When a girl menstruates for the first time, friends and relatives are informed and letters are written to kith and kin who reside outside the village, the girl is dressed in fine clothes and paraded round with a band of musicians playing various instruments and sweetmeats are distributed to everyone. It is indeed a ridiculous and shameful display...⁹⁹

Considering one's own traditions foolish or extravagant might have been a change in attitude brought about by Western influence but what is more important is the fact that such elaborate rituals were considered a waste of money which could otherwise be wisely invested in getting a daughter educated. The habit of accumulating gold and silver ornaments came to be criticised too. Women were advised that jewellery could be stolen but if the same money were invested in 'Promissory Notes and Post Office Savings' it could earn interest on their capital.¹⁰⁰ Even some habits like wearing shoes outdoors which were recognised as Western were advocated on their sanitary merits for women to emulate; likewise the habit of taking physical exercise.¹⁰¹ Not all customs were condemned and dismissed, for, with a discerning eye, women advocated the retaining of certain rituals like dohale (pregnancy rites). This custom was re-defined as having a scientific basis and retained for its uses but

⁹⁹Anon, 'Amchya kithyek vedgal chali rithi' (Some of our foolish traditions), ibid., Oct. 1901, pp.156-58.

¹⁰⁰Manakbai Lad, 'Dagine' (Jewellery), Arya Bhagini (Marathi), Sept. 1891, p.80, (SVGP).

¹⁰¹Lakshmibai Phadnis, 'Striyanchi durbalata' (Women's physical weakness), Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Sept. 1901, pp.131-34, (MMG).

without the expensive ceremony surrounding it.¹⁰² Thus it was not so much a 'civilising mission' that prompted women to advocate reforms in rituals but that the money saved could be re-directed to benefit women.

The practice of hunda (dowry) and unsuitable marriages

One of the most radical reforms advocated by women was the practice of hunda and the expectation of gifts from the bride's family.¹⁰³ According to Maharashtrian women writing in the late nineteenth century four or five thousand rupees was a minimum sum demanded as hunda from a girl's family.¹⁰⁴ Often a good looking, clever and intelligent girl could not marry a man of equal calibre unless her father had amassed a great deal of wealth. Enforced marriages were considered to be a result of the greed and avarice of a groom's family and the material expectations of a bride's family leading to mismatched marriages. Women exposed Hindu marriages as being contracts rather than sacraments, unlike what leading male reformers maintained during the Age of Consent debates.¹⁰⁵

The utter devaluation of the female sex was vividly described by women. A much quoted example was that of an intelligent, industrious and beautiful girl who could not secure a suitable match unless her father had a great deal of money while an illiterate old man, known to be a gambler and wastrel, could still manage to marry as many women as he desired.¹⁰⁶ Such undesirable marriages were described as rising from the inhuman basis of these transactional negotiations and the desire to rise in social status.

In order to remedy this situation they advocated that wealthy parents should

¹⁰² Anon., 'Some of our foolish traditions', *ibid.*, Oct. 1901, p.157.

¹⁰³ Even the more radical male reformers of the Arya Samaj never attacked the custom of dowry. Kishwar, 'Arya Samaj and women's education,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, WS-14.

¹⁰⁴ Anandibai Lad, 'Lagnyachi chali' (Marriage customs), *Arya Bhagini*, (Marathi), Mar. 1886, pp.1-3, (SVGP).

¹⁰⁵ Maharashtrian women wrote extensively on the custom of child-marriage and conjugal relations. They participated actively in the enactment of the Age of Consent Act, 1891 and the restitution of conjugal rights. See chapter Six.

¹⁰⁶ Anandibai Lad, 'Marriage customs', *Arya Bhagini*, (Marathi), Mar. 1886, p.2, (SVGP).

not include hunda as part of marriage transactions but to give gifts of money and ornaments to their daughters after the complete integration of the daughter in the home of her in-laws.¹⁰⁷ Clever and good natured girls from wealthy families were to be married to educated young men without regard to the class to which they belonged. Such reforms in the structure of marriage negotiations were put forward in the belief that this was the only way of ensuring the happiness of women.

The problem of unsuitable marriages, i.e., young girls being married to old men, was tackled by women with similar determination. A great deal of anger was expressed at the pretensions of males who could not accept old age gracefully as well as compassion for the young bride who had the misfortune of being tied to an old man. To quote one such scathing piece:

Consider the case of a sixty year old frail man and his ten year old wife ! The man has lost all his teeth, salivates all the time, his body is putrid with decay and emits a foul odour, and one wonders if he is going to live today or not! What can a bride do in such circumstances ? How can one expect her to be an obedient wife.¹⁰⁸

Women also wrote about the vanity and the callousness of men who had psychological problems in accepting old age and unnecessarily involved women in their ego quest, which turned a new bride into a widow. Tarabai Shinde gave descriptions of eighty-year-old men who wished to gain the young appearance and physical prowess of a twenty-year old youth and to achieve this a man would use false teeth, dye his hair and eat the kind of food that was supposed to have aphrodisiac effects. The mental maturity of women is argued as being far superior to that of men in such instances.¹⁰⁹ Most women recognised that parents who were too poor to find

¹⁰⁷Anandibai Lad, 'Lavkar lagna karnyache chal' (The custom of early marriage), Arya Bhagini, Mar. 1886, pp.3-4, (SVGP).

¹⁰⁸Kanthabai, 'Condition of women', (Part I), Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), April 1892, p.29.

¹⁰⁹Tarabai Shinde, Stripurushtulana athava striya va purush yant sahasi kon he spasta karun dakavinyakarita ha nibandh (Comparison of woman and man or an essay showing who is more wicked), (Marathi), (Bombay, 1975), 1st ed., 1882, pp.10-11, (MMG).

suitors for their daughters married them to old men of sixty years or so because of the stigma attached to virgin girls after a certain marriageable age and the fear of female sexuality but mainly due to the desire to rise quickly in the social scale through demands for a high dowry. In such cases they advised them to educate girls for a professional training.¹¹⁰

The system of demanding dowry, gifts during and after marriage, from the bride's family was supposed to cause internecine feuds, as often the couples were related in some way or other and this eventually led to destructive results. Moreover, since both the girl and boy were too young to understand the mechanisms of such contracts they ended in only reproducing the vicious cycle of bearing weak and sickly children at an immature age, demanding and squabbling over dowries and marrying their own children at a tender age. That people lost precious time in such harmful practices, women reasoned, was ultimately a loss for the nation.

The question of widowhood: widow re-marriage, the tonsure ceremony and education

Women wrote extensively on the education, employment, ill-treatment of widows especially keshavapan (the tonsure ceremony) and many radical suggestions were made in this regard. In recent years scholars working on the gender history of India have shown how indigenous elites built a discourse on reform issues by referring to the sanction or non-sanction of the Shastras.¹¹¹ It is argued here that a study of women's perceptions on the subject shows how vastly they differed from male opinions and how they perceived it from a feminist viewpoint.

That the life of an Indian widow was the most tortuous ordeal of a woman's life was unanimously agreed upon by women. Therefore they addressed themselves to redressing the widow's miserable life-style. Many of the hardships of widows were traced to the fact that they were prevented from re-marriage. Women argued for remarriage of widows on humanitarian grounds unlike men who argued for the

¹¹⁰Anandibai Prabhu Desai, 'Which is the most appropriate curriculum for women?', Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Sept. 1901, p.80, (MMG).

¹¹¹Lata Mani, 'Production of an official discourse on Sati in early nineteenth century Bengal', Economic and Political Weekly, 26 Apr. 1886, WS-32-WS-40.

sanction or non-sanction of shastras. A woman protagonist succinctly argued that:

Even if a custom is non-conformable with the shastras, if that particular custom is bringing sorrow to large sections of the population, then such a custom should be cast away.¹¹²

For female reformers it was not the acceptability or non-acceptability of remarriage by the scriptures which was to decide the issue but the agony and misery of a lifetime that widows faced ahead of them.

Women argued for widow remarriage on the basis of equal rights. Often they were countered by arguments of the superiority of the male sex over that of the female which only served to strengthen the opposition of women.¹¹³ Even the opinion of housewives were quoted by women to add force to their statements. Deploing the chauvinism and hypocrisy of men, a housewife asked:

What is wrong in marrying again after being widowed? When a 50 or 60 year old frail and sickly old widower marries a 12 year old girl, that act is completely acceptable to our society. Sometimes a man does not even wait for a while after his wife dies and immediately afterwards marries another girl. What sin have women committed to deserve such treatment?¹¹⁴

It was in areas of extreme hostility like the question of remarriage that women welcomed and sought the intervention of the government. The suggestion that the government should ban elderly widowers from remarrying and enforce compulsory legislation for remarriage of child-widows was expressed in poetry, letters, short stories and articles written by women.

¹¹²Anon, 'Saraswat Gaud Brahmanache Swami ani stripunarvivaha' (The leader of the Saraswat Gaud Brahmin community and widow re-marriage), Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Oct. 1891, p.81, (SVGP); See also Editorial, 'Samajik sudharana' (Social reform), ibid., Jun. 1891, p.51.

¹¹³'Eka sushiksit stri kadun' (By an educated lady), 'Gulabbai ani Shevatibai yancha bodhpar samvad' (Instructive debates between Gulabbai and Shewatibai), ibid., Jul. 1891, p.62.

¹¹⁴'Ek Gaud Saraswat Brahmani stri' (A Gaud Saraswat Brahman lady), 'Punarvivaha' (Remarriage), ibid., Jul. 1891, p.64.

That this feminist consciousness had reached a far more mature stage than an embryo phase is evident in the consensus of opinions expressed by most Maharashtrian women in a major controversy that took place in 1890s. Among a large number of Hindu sub-castes in the nineteenth-century disputes on social issues were settled by a caste panchayat (council) consisting of powerful and wealthy leaders of the group.¹¹⁵ After Dr.R.G. Bhandarkar had seen through the wedding of his widowed daughter in 1891, some of the Gaud Saraswat families filed a suit against him in the caste council with the intention of ostracising him and his family. Saraswat Gaud Brahmin women wrote scathing letters to the opponents refuting their arguments against widow re-marriage. Their arguments hinged on humanitarian concerns and made no reference to the Shastras. They dismissed the spiritual head of their community as illiterate and conservative besides being power-hungry and acquisitive. They expressed distress at the youth of the Saraswat community who had pretensions to modernity and yet were actually aligned with the conservatives. A particularly significant letter by a Saraswat woman who condemned the hypocrisy of the so-called educated class of men of her caste is worth citing. According to her, they were the ones:

who rave about knowing English, staying in a large city like Bombay, assuming superior airs constantly by referring to all other people outside of Bombay as boorish and vulgar and laugh at them. How is it that over a reform issue your intellect has left you?¹¹⁶

This fiery writer used a particularly derogatory term potepurte shiklele lok to describe such men who acquired an English or Western education merely to gratify the needs of their senses, and not for self-improvement. Compared to such men, she declared,

¹¹⁵Pathare Reform Association, Marriage of Hindu widows, advocated by the Pathare Reform Association of Bombay: With an epitome of the history of Bhim Raja, founder of the race of Pathare Prabhus, (Marathi/English), (Bombay, 1869), 1st ed. 1863 ; See also Frank Conlon, A caste in a changing world: The Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins, 1700-1935, (Berkeley, 1975).

¹¹⁶'Ek Saraswat Gaud Brahmani stri' (A Saraswat Gaud Brahman lady), 'Saraswat Gaud Brahmanachya swamiche prakaran' (Public announcement of the Head of Saraswat Gaud Brahman community), Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Oct. 1891, p.85, (SVGP).

women were definitely in every way superior to men.

The prevalent male opinion argued against widow-remarriage by stating that women themselves were against it. Such allegations were challenged by women who quoted the opinions of illiterate housewives and child widows as proof of their desire to re-marry and start a family life again. To quote the opinion of a woman on the subject:

There are many people who hold the opinion that until women are able to take advantage of education they will not desire any reform. It is probably true that many women are uneducated, but a large proportion of them who haven't received even elementary education think in a progressive manner. If you ask them about a topic like widow re-marriage they immediately say, just as it was in ancient days, widow re-marriage should be revived as a custom and the sooner it is done the better. Many make subtle enquiries of this and a lot of women are aware of the laws. Therefore, it is absolutely essential to have remarriage among widows.¹¹⁷

Women were of the opinion that only very elderly women in Hindu households were opposed to widow re-marriage. But, younger widows could only make 'subtle enquiries' about re-marriage as prevailing notions of female sexuality would not allow them to be blatant about their sexual needs. This realisation prompted them to suggest that the state should pass laws making it compulsory for child widows to remarry and allowing choice for elderly widows. The interminable link between child marriage and widow remarriage was recognised by women. A radical suggestion by some was to ask for government intervention to enact a law in such a manner that if a girl's parents had married her very young, and if she, later became a widow, then the parents were to be forced to re-marry their daughter. The logic of such a suggestion was that child widows were invariably illiterate due to the custom of child marriage and would be too frightened or even fail to understand the justness of such an act, having known no other lifestyle. Besides, such enforcement would act as a deterrent to conformist

¹¹⁷ 'A Gaud Saraswat Brahman lady', 'Remarriage', *ibid.*, Jul. 1891, p.53.

parents from marrying their daughters too young.¹¹⁸

A high degree of awareness was present among women on the origins and motivations of the tonsure ceremony that widows underwent soon after the death of their husbands. The humiliation and pain that widows experienced was graphically described by women. Shevatibai, who witnessed such a scene, explained it to a friend thus:

In our neighbourhood, a Brahmin boy died. His wife is only thirteen years old. As they took him to the burning ground, the barber was summoned and against her will cut off all her glossy hair. The poor girl was mooing like a cow in distress. Whenever I remember the scene I break out in a cold sweat...¹¹⁹

Women dreaded widowhood which came in an elaborate form of symbolic rituals. The first among these rituals was the keshavapan ceremony. Amidst a large gathering of kith and kin, a barber would shave the head of the grieving widow. This ritual signified the beginning of a harsh lifestyle of coarse clothing, sparse meals and a regimented life under the constant surveillance of family members. Quite a few women doubted that the custom had sanction in the religious texts and traced it instead to the cruel and selfish nature of the opposite sex.¹²⁰ That men could not control their own passions and made women victims of their own weaknesses was very often offered as an explanation for this gruesome act. By cutting the hair and forcing her to wear only red sarees she was made to look unsightly and ugly so that men would not be attracted to her.¹²¹ Such acts according to women did not reflect

¹¹⁸ 'By an educated lady', 'Instructive debates between Gulabbai and Shewatibai', ibid., Jul. 1891, p.63.

¹¹⁹ 'By an educated lady', 'Instructive debates between Shewatibai and Gulabbai', ibid., Oct. 1891, pp.86-87.

¹²⁰ Many widows interviewed by Parvatibai Athavale disclosed that they knew that the tonsure ceremony was not mentioned in the Epics and probably did not exist in the Vedic period but they were informed by men that it was written in Manu's work. In Parvatibai, My story, p.51.

¹²¹ Besides making them unattractive, widows were confined to the mazghar (the most central part of the house) where no light penetrated so that no one could see them even by accident. This custom was due to the superstition that the sight of a widow while attending to an important business brought ill-luck. Padmaja Phatak, Shikshantagnyan Tarabai Modak (The great educationist Tarabai Modak),

well on purusharth (manhood or prowess) of the other sex because it only revealed their vulnerability and utter mental weakness.

Some women traced the keshavapan custom to the avarice and acquisitive nature of the priestly class and the barbers. The various ceremonies and the fee and gifts made during the ceremony were supposed to have kept the custom alive for the benefit of these classes. Kanthabai condemned these classes of men, by asking them:

Is it just to live off the proceeds of such an evil custom? Isn't it shameful and despicable to think that a slab of butter placed on a corpse before the cremation would make a delicious meal?¹²²

That men were not only acquisitive in their motives but used any opportunity, however sub-human, to acquire more wealth was stressed by women.

In the drive to spread awareness of ways to confront this custom, suggestions included possible law suits against priests and barbers. Widows were encouraged to rebel by pointing out the essential fact that they would not be ex-communicated if they refused to have their hair cut, although they would be prevented from joining in certain ceremonies. Maharashtrian women were made aware of the fact that this heinous custom was not prevalent in Bengal and Kathiawar, which strengthened the argument of those who insisted that it was not authorised by the Shastras. Female leaders like Parvatibai Athavale spent their entire adult lives campaigning for a ban on this custom and spreading awareness amongst women.¹²³

(Marathi), (Bombay, 1981), p.2.

¹²²Kanthabai, 'Condition of women', Arya Bhagini, (Part I) Apr. 1892, p.28.

¹²³Parvatibai Athavale: Born in 1870 at Devrukhi in a poor Brahmin family. She was married at the age of eleven and was widowed at twenty-one. When her widowed sister, Bayabai married D.K.Karve it transformed her life. Her sister brought her to Poona and encouraged her to study. At the age of twenty-eight, she trained to be a teacher but her natural aptitude for oratory led her to become a full-time fund-raiser of the Hingne Widows' Home started in 1897 by Karve. She believed that widows should not wait for deliverance but act. She campaigned incessantly for a ban on the tonsure ceremony. She was one of the few Hindu female leaders who would not mince words with foot-dragging male reformers. At the age of forty-six, she went to America and learnt about the women's movement and also addressed prominent women's organisations like the Sorosis Club in New York. She disliked Indians who imitated the West blindly. Instead she asked women to learn their organisational skills, discipline and methods.

Most women agreed that widows should receive a professional education. Wherever widows could afford it they were encouraged to stay in boarding schools and colleges. The reasons for such a radical policy was that there was no proper study atmosphere for a widow at home where she was made to work long hours and very little leisure time was given to her. Besides she commanded no authority or dignity at home.¹²⁴

Women constructed an ideology of 'work' for widows as being extremely awarding both physically and mentally. A standard argument was that participation of widows in paid jobs would help them to have the physical exercise so essential for health; keeping a widow physically and mentally occupied would ensure her own protection from evil influences and attentions of the other sex; and she would find life less loathsome and tiresome. As Venubai said:

We can be given socially beneficial work, unlike only that of going round and round the Tulsi plant or making cotton wicks. We do not want to spend our entire lives with a downcast face bowing to the Tulsi plant or making cotton wicks for Pooja[worship].¹²⁵

Aside from removing the boredom, it was argued that her own family would stop considering her a burden and appreciate her good work, adding to her self esteem. If she were to engage in welfare schemes which had a direct beneficial effect on society and the nation, it would then be God's cause, too!

Widows argued that they could serve the society and nation better than anyone else as they were not tied up by familial obligations. It is interesting to note here that Maharashtrian women used the rhetoric of 'social service' to legitimate the widow's entry into the public arena long before Gandhi began to do so.¹²⁶ The trials and tribulations of a widow were quoted as giving them the necessary patience, training

¹²⁴Venubai Namjoshi, 'Sushiksit bandhuna anath bhaginichyavatinen vignyapathi (An appeal from helpless sisters to their educated brothers), *Maharashtra Mahila*, Aug. 1902, p.85-86, (MMG).

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, p.86.

¹²⁶For Gandhi's views on the utility of the widow to the nation, see Kishwar, 'Gandhi on women', p.1693.

and tolerance for professions like teaching and nursing. This rhetoric was a significant weapon in the Seva Sadan's arsenal in the 1910s to justify the professional education of widows who formed almost half of their student population.¹²⁷ There was also a great deal of resentment at the usurpation of the role of midwives and indigenous female Vaidyas by allopathic or English medicine.¹²⁸ During the nineteenth century, the woman in labour as well as the parturient mother were associated with notions of pollution. While there was a movement among educated women to reform the practices surrounding childbirth and post-natal care based on Western medicine, widows began to be perceived as potential midwives and nurses who could take on these tasks without much opposition from their families.¹²⁹

Arguments for the participation of widows in the job market on a par with men was rarely made on grounds of equal rights. It is probable that Hindu widows functioning in a Hindu family and society did not consider it strategically advisable to demand jobs on the basis of rights.

Solidarity among bhaginivarg (sisterhood)

A nascent sisterhood was gradually building up among women and the prime moving factor was the hostility of men in areas of concern which were identified as women's problems. The clearest example of this is the manner in which Hindu women rallied round Pandita Ramabai when powerful Maharashtrian politicians like B.G.Tilak spread scandals about her institutions. At the height of the opposition to Pandita Ramabai, Hindu female leaders like Ramabai Ranade visited her with gifts for her pupils. Besides, Ramabai Ranade would personally escort widows who showed an interest in studying in Pandita Ramabai's institutions.¹³⁰ Hindu female leaders justified Pandita Ramabai's actions on the ground that her institutions were alleviating the miseries of

¹²⁷Silver Jubilee Album, p.38, (ICPSS).

¹²⁸Kashibai, 'Women's duties', Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Oct. 1901, p.178, (MMG).

¹²⁹Jivutai Mantri, 'Striyanchi prasuti ani tatsambandhi upchar' (On delivery and related subjects), Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Feb.1901, pp.70-85, (MMG).

¹³⁰Pandita Ramabai's Report in the Annual Report of the American Ramabai Association, 1894, p.27, (ICMM).

countless widows and abandoned women. They questioned the purusharth (prowess or manliness) of men who were good only at condemning the actions of well-intentioned women while merely perpetuating their sufferings.¹³¹ At a time when very few people had sympathy for Pandita Ramabai it was among Hindu and Christian women that a sense of solidarity took place and girls and widows were equally encouraged to attend her schools.

A sense of common commitment bound Parsi, Christian, and Hindu women on several issues like the agitation over the Age of Consent debates in the 1890s.¹³² During the uproar over the appointment of Lady Superintendents and Inspectresses of Municipal Schools in the city of Bombay in 1901, one of the popular arguments was that only European women could properly carry out the kinds of tasks that men could perform.¹³³ Maharashtrian women united on this issue and condemned such a view as a slur on 'Indian womanhood'. Communal politics among men led them to argue that to secure Hindu female inspectresses for Hindu girls' schools was difficult and therefore it was best to appoint Hindu men. However, among women the solidarity was much stronger and allowed them to adopt the attitude that until Hindu women came forward, women of other faiths should be allotted to the post of inspectress or headmistress.¹³⁴

Many women's journals functioned like counselling bureaux. Women communicated their problems through letters and the editor either published them in their original form or quoted excerpts from them and left it to readers to send in their suggestions. Many of the headmistresses of girls' schools were quick to grasp the advantages of such journals and subscribed to them in large numbers.¹³⁵ Passionate friendships developed through such correspondence and admiration for the work done

¹³¹Manakbai Lad, 'Pandita Ramabai', Arya Bhagini, Aug. 1891, pp.68-69, (SVGP).

¹³²See Chapter Six for details.

¹³³Editorial, Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Oct. 1901, p.147, (MMG).

¹³⁴Ibid., p.147.

¹³⁵Radhabai's letter to the editor of Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Aug. 1890, p.92, (SVGP).

by their favourite female leaders were expressed in an unabashed manner.¹³⁶ They reviewed each other's books, wrote biographies of famous contemporary women in the belief that 'a biography of a woman should be written by women', housed each other in times of need, and thus created bonding between them.¹³⁷ The intra-personal bonds created among Maharashtrian women are comparable to that of English and American women during the early nineteenth-century feminist movements, when intra-personal relationships enhanced their lives.¹³⁸ Besides providing moral support, they were acutely sensitive to the lack of funds for their projects. There is an instance when women condemn the acts of wealthy women who donated large sums of money to the Gayan Samaj (Music Association) instead of institutions which were engaged specifically for women's welfare.¹³⁹ This 'coming-together' is particularly striking when we consider the context in which this particular music association was founded.¹⁴⁰

'Golden Age' theories and Hindu women

Since Hindu women remained within the broad parameters of Hindu religious structure, their perceptions of the 'Golden Age' theory differed from Christian women. An attempt is made here to understand how they approached notions of a glorious

¹³⁶Rametabai Bhujangarao Mankar's poem on Manakbai Lad, 'Dindi'(Torch-bearer), Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Sept. 1890, n.p., (SVGP) ; Also Manoramabai's editorial in praise of Savitribai Bhatwadekar's work, Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Aug. 1902, p.66-69, (MMG).

¹³⁷Kashibai Kanitkar's book-review of Parvatibai Chitnavis, Amchya jagacha pravas (Our travels around the world), in Vividhadnyanvistar, (Marathi), Mar. 1916, pp.20-26, (MMG); Kamalabai Kibe's book-review of Kashibai Kanitkar, Dr.Anandibai Joshi yanche charitra (The biography of Dr.Anandibai Joshi), in Vividhadnyanvistar, Mar. 1916, pp.14-20, (MMG); Preface of Kashibai Kanitkar, Sou.Dr.Anandibai Joshi yancha charitra (Biography of Mrs.Dr.Anandibai Joshi), p.2.

¹³⁸For bonding among Victorian women in England see Philippa Levine, Victorian feminism:1850-1920, (London, 1987); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The female world of love and ritual: relations between women in nineteenth century America', Signs, Autumn 1975, pp.1-29.

¹³⁹Editorial, 'Schemes and efforts', Maharashtra Mahila, Aug. 1902, p.67, (MMG).

¹⁴⁰Part of the religious revivalism/nationalism had inspired Indian art critics like Ananda Coomaraswamy to conduct a crusade about Indian art's high spiritual qualities which set it in the front rank of the world art if not higher than others. Several music societies sprang up funded by nationalists. The Poona Gayan Samaj was one of the most notable ones. J.N. Farquhar, Modern religious movements in India, (New York, 1915).

Hindu past with its accompanying representations of Indian womanhood.

Hindu women's approach to the Indian past, as well as Westernisation, was articulated by their position on the importance of monogamy, choice in marriage, widow re-marriage and other related gender issues. Equality in gender relations, higher ritual and social status for women were believed to have existed in the 'Golden Age' of ancient India. Such assertions were made on the authority of epics and the Puranas to which most women had access and sometimes by quoting the views of established scholarly works of Max Mueller or reformers like R.G.Bhandarkar. They echoed indigenous male sources in their explanations for the degeneration that was supposed to have followed the 'Golden Age' by pointing to Muslim influences.

The imposition of purdah (women used the terms puddah and ghosha), for example, was traced to the Muslim conquest of India.¹⁴¹ Interestingly, women writing on this subject argued that Hindu women were forced to adopt purdah in northern and eastern parts of the country in order to protect their sexuality from the conquering Muslim invaders.¹⁴² Some Maharashtrian women who travelled to parts of Bengal and Punjab like Anandibai Joshi and Ramabai Ranade were struck by the differences in the way women dressed as well as the general attitudes towards women in Maharashtra and elsewhere in India. Anandibai Joshi recorded her unhappiness and frustration when she lived in Calcutta in 1881. She was pelted with stones when she went to the bazaar on her own and wrote:

This country[referring to Bengal] is not a good one for us for we are living in a manner not warranted by its customs...There is so much of the Zenana system here that a woman can scarcely stand in the presence of her relatives,- much less before her husband. Her face is always veiled. She is not allowed to speak to any man,- much less laugh with him. Even the baboos, who have spent years in England, will not drive here, with their wives, in open carriages.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹It appears that women applied the terms 'ghosha' and 'purdah' to the custom of veiling as well as the physical mobility that was restricted by such a custom.

¹⁴²Editorial, Maharashtra Mahila, Oct. 1901, p.146, (MMG).

¹⁴³C.H.Dall, The life of Anandabai Joshi (Boston, 1888), p.40.

Ramabai Ranade was similarly struck by the relative freedom of Maharashtrian women in comparison to women from Delhi, Punjab and Bengal. She saw groups of Bengali female pilgrims in Mathura and Pushkar who were not wearing cholis (blouses). When she ventured to ask them, they asked her in return if the women from her region enjoyed walking about rudely with their heads uncovered in the presence of men?¹⁴⁴ Maharashtrian women never missed an opportunity to stress the fact that in the provinces ruled by the Marathas the custom of purdah was not practised except in aristocratic families.¹⁴⁵ This may be read as a strategy to empower themselves with the help of the strength of tradition. In their strategies to encourage girls' education they discouraged such schools which made allowances for purdah yet whenever such schools were established they adopted a policy of tolerance in the belief that among the northern and central provinces of India progressive changes in the lives of women would come only through incorporating certain customs, although injurious to women.¹⁴⁶

Pride in Maratha history and culture was constantly present in their writings and the numerous examples of chivalrous Maratha queens were quoted to seek inspiration and for legitimation. The most popular heroines were Ahilyabai, Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi, Tulsabai and Bayjabai - all of whom were recalled for their heroic deeds on the battlefield.¹⁴⁷ The early women's movement used the images of the warrior-queens of Maharashtra in their efforts to imbue women with what were perceived to be the male qualities of statesmanship, bravery and adventure. Gandhi, on the other hand, repeatedly dismissed the 'more situationally relevant Rani of Jhansi', even when he called on women to join the Non-cooperation

¹⁴⁴Ramabai Ranade, Ranade: His wife's reminiscences, p.122.

¹⁴⁵This is true of Maharashtrian women whether Christian or Hindu. As a rule Pandita Ramabai would not allow any man unaccompanied by a woman to hear her lectures on the ground that they had no excuse as purdah was not a Maharashtrian custom. Sarojini, Mrs Kashibai Kanitkar, p.88.

¹⁴⁶Editorial, Maharashtra Mahila, Oct. 1901, p.146, (MMG).

¹⁴⁷Kashibai Kanitkar, 'Samrajyasatthekhali stri shikshanachi pragati', (Progress of women's education under Imperial rule), Vividhadnyanvistar, (Marathi), Apr. 1912, p.556, (MMG) ; Editorial, Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Mar. 1901, p.101, (MMG).

Movement.¹⁴⁸ Madhu Kishwar notes that Gandhi's view of a woman's strength was her 'dazzling purity' and 'chastity' which led him to choose the 'Sita, Draupadi and Damayanti', model for Indian womanhood.¹⁴⁹ On the other hand, Maharashtrian women preferred models of learning, like Gargi, Maithreyi and Leelavati; warrior-queens like Lakshmibai, Ahilyabai and Tarabai; female saints and poetesses who had performed unusual public roles like Janabai, Aakabai, Muktabai and Chokamelastree. Such women were considered 'creators of Marathi poetry, advisers to the ignorant public and toilers for the nation's progress' and biographies on them were written in women's magazines.¹⁵⁰ There is a perceptible change in the role-models used by Maharashtrian women in the early twentieth century. Jijabai, the mother of Shivaji, became an extremely popular role-model about whom books and essays were written and lectures delivered by female leaders.¹⁵¹ Women were urged to play twin roles - private and public, like Jijabai, who, according to female leaders was both a good mother and, when circumstances demanded it, an able administrator. How do we account for this change? A plausible explanation lies in the fact that the women's movement in Maharashtra had a fair degree of success in the twin areas of education and the professional roles of women, as indicated in the growth of institutions like the Seva Sadan. The Gargi-Maithreyi models of learning had thus been legitimated. The entry of the Jijabai model represents the new political aspirations of women.

Images of liberated women were drawn from mythology as well as the concept of sahadharmini (co-religionist and equal partner). It is significant that Christian women also commented on the concept of sahadharmini but the latter were critical, unlike Hindu women.¹⁵² Such images were represented by Hindu women as having

¹⁴⁸Kishwar, 'Gandhi on women', p.1692.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., p.1691.

¹⁵⁰Manoramabai Mitra, 'Prachin striyanchi Marathi kavita' (The Marathi poetry of women of ancient India), Maharashtra Mahila, Oct. 1903, pp.230-38, (MMG).

¹⁵¹Yashodabai Bhat is reported to have written a novel on Jijabai, 'Trying to live by her principles', Manushi, No.48, 1988, pp.30-31; Plays were written on her life as well as lectures and debates organised, reported by Anandibai Shirke, The evening lamp, (Marathi), p.266.

¹⁵²See Chapter One.

been the actual reality in the 'Golden Age' of India's past. Indian women were exhorted to revive such a past which integrated such a high status for women in society. In a similar vein one finds the woman editor of Arya Bhagini arguing for choice in marriage, adult marriage, education for women and for equal partnership with men, by referring to India's past:

In the olden days we had the custom of swayamvar for girls. In order to qualify for this ceremony the girl had to be above 17 years of age and below 25 while the youth was between 20-35 years old. Since this was a couple united by mutual consent they were an extremely happy pair. The husband, in every important task and test of his life always consulted and sought her participation. He considered his wife as his best friend; in battles too, she participated on an equal footing as him. Thus there was mutual understanding and love and the union of minds was complete. Due to adult and choice in marriage their offspring likewise, were healthy, courageous, strong and intelligent. Thus none of them ever saw untimely death.¹⁵³

The representations of womanhood in the 'Golden Age' by Hindu women were always positive in hailing rights for women. Clear evidence of this is the relative silence in Maharashtrian Hindu women's writings on sati (widow-burning) during this period.¹⁵⁴ The main motive for such conspicuous silence could be the fact that condemnation of it would mean denial of saintly and martyr-like qualities among women and interpreted as a direct attack on Hindu past which was not a strategic move for women. The rare references to it are made in an inverted way, either by equalising the pain of the subject by making it compulsory for widowers to ascend the funeral pyre of their wives or forcing them to go into grahasthashram (ascetic mode

¹⁵³Anandibai Lad, 'The custom of early marriage', Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Mar. 1886, p.5, (SVGP).

¹⁵⁴One obvious reason for the silence is that sati was comparatively rare in Maharashtra. See Kenneth Ballhatchet, Social policy and social change in Western India, 1817-1830, (London, 1957), pp.276-91.

of life) instead of inflicting misery on women by polygamy.¹⁵⁵ Sometimes, an occasional reference is made to sati in short stories and semi-fictional writing by women to highlight the immense suffering of widows which may have prompted them to commit suicide.¹⁵⁶

Regarding influences from the West, there is no doubt that the images of courageous and career-oriented European women, ranging from Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale to Elizabeth Garrett Anderson were useful for inspiring Hindu women.¹⁵⁷ Yet a blind imitation of Western life was deprecated. Maharashtrian women like Anandibai Joshi and Parvatibai Athavale who had the opportunity to travel in America expressed shock and concern at the breakdown in conjugal relationships in the West and sought to safeguard Indian familial ties from such influences.

The question of Westernisation was closely linked to Hindu women's notions of India's 'Golden Age'. Concepts of 'liberty', 'bondage', 'slavery' and 'freedom' were analysed in some detail, though a great deal of ambiguity is apparent in their writings. Thus, Anandibai Prabhu Desai expressed discontent with terms like bandhivasan (bondage) and dasyatva (slavery), which she argued were constantly used to express the condition of Indian women. According to her, these did injustice to Indian women while the terms swatantra (freedom) and mokaleek (independent) were standard expressions used to describe the position of Western women.¹⁵⁸ However, she offers no alternative definition. Other women like Girijabai Kelkar, after examining women's role in the ancient, medieval and modern times, comes to the conclusion that, 'the concept of equality is a new term that Indians have learnt from the West in politics alone, but as far as practice is concerned, equality between male

¹⁵⁵ One such example is Tarabai Shinde who argued that it was better for men to immolate themselves rather than for widows because the latter had to rear children, Comparison of woman and man, p.20.

¹⁵⁶ Tarabai Shinde, ibid., see footnote on page 20. See also, 'By an educated lady', 'Instructive debates', Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Jul. 1891, p.61, (SVGP).

¹⁵⁷ The life and works of these women were constantly published in women's magazines, e.g., Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Jul. 1890, pp.50-61, (SVGP).

¹⁵⁸ Anandibai Prabhu Desai, 'Which is the most appropriate curriculum for women?', Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Aug. 1901, pp.74-75, (MMG).

and female has been in our country from ancient times onwards'.¹⁵⁹

The links between Westernisation and the 'Golden Age' were multiple and complex. Women asserted that education, public participation, equal status on a par with men were norms of ancient Indian society and their efforts were merely aimed at revival rather than importation from the West. An instance of this theory is Anandibai's perception that:

There are some people among us who hold the view that the concept of education for women has been borrowed from the West. But in a country where there are female deities for learning, wealth, and justice etc., and where jewels amongst women like Leelavati, Gargi, Kani and Ahilyabai Holkar have lived, to express such an opinion is indeed an erroneous and preposterous statement.¹⁶⁰

Such a viewpoint was probably necessary for breaking down the resistance of conditioned women like mothers-in-laws who constantly opposed their daughter-in-laws' education.¹⁶¹ It was also crucial in the women's struggle because with a theory of revivalism they could contend with their bitterest enemies - the Hindu traditionalists while at the same time not lose the sympathy of the liberal reformers. Western, or more appropriately modern, ways of thought were perceived by women as a channel of cognition or as a filter for realisation of self-potential. Such a complex theory is summarised by Gulabbai as:

I feel that as women realise and learn and educate themselves, Western ideas will seep into their minds. Then the transformation will take place amongst women who will just go back to our own pristine and glorious past and consciously revive the

¹⁵⁹Girijabai Kelkar's speech as the Chairperson of the Eighth Women's Conference, held at Wardha, 27 October 1934: Shri.Sou.Girijabai Kelkar vanchi adhyakshiya bhashane (The Presidential speeches of Girijabai Kelkar), (Marathi), (Dhule, 1957), p.40.

¹⁶⁰Anandibai Prabhu Desai, 'Which is the most appropriate curriculum for women?' Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), p.74, (MMG).

¹⁶¹Semi-fictional works published monthly in a serialised form throughout the life of several women's journals carry these notions.

custom of choice in marriage and the evil custom of child-marriage will die away...¹⁶²

Finally, a good index of Hindu women's idea of progress can be culled from the school magazine of Poona's earliest High School for Girls, now called the Huzur Paga School. This school produced some of the most influential Maharashtrian nationalists between 1910 and 1947.¹⁶³ Essays written by them reveal the following ideas - self-reliance and equality can only be had by those women who equip themselves with a degree, those who progress beyond the chool va mool (kitchen fire-place and the child) and those who work for a cause or mission.¹⁶⁴ However, the consistent position they maintained was that rights, equality and self-reliance were concepts that had existed in the Hindu past. They were striding back into the past to reclaim their rights. Their uncritical appraisal of the 'Golden Age', as well as their failure to break with the past not only distinguishes them from Christian women but also gives us a clue in comprehending why Maharashtrian women responded to Gandhi's call after 1920. Gandhi used the representations of Indian womanhood in a similar manner to the way Hindu women had used them. His ideals of womanhood like Sita, Draupadi and Damayanti were not passive and subservient women but bold and independent-minded women. Maharashtrian women found the Gandhian rhetoric appealing not just because of its familiar tone but also the added promise that they could now be men's equals in the hitherto forbidden arena of politics. Hindu women's need for a strong female collectivity led them to the positive reclamation of a Hindu past. However, the same tradition that gave them the strength to build the women's movement also constrained them later when the nationalist movement became an essentially political movement.

¹⁶²'By an educated lady', 'Instructive debates', Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Jun. 1891, p.52, (SVGP).

¹⁶³Vidya Bal, Kamalaki (Aunt Kamala), (Marathi), (Bombay, 1972), especially Chapter Six.

¹⁶⁴Indumati Kelkar, 'Adarsh hindi striyanchi kartavya; Duties of the ideal Indian woman', Balikadarsh, (Marathi), Apr. 1936, pp.30-32, (Collection of Huzur Paga School).

Conclusion

An analysis of the development of the women's movement highlights several issues. The more traditional women were awakened over their need to cope with the changes brought by urbanisation and the changing needs of the middle class. The more progressive among them developed a clearly feminist perspective by relating to the everyday misery of a female, child-wife or widow. However, the meeting point of the two was that together they constructed a critique on the 'condition of women' based on either their own personal experiences or the everyday existence of their bhagini (sisters).

The creation of a separate public female sphere as seen in the activities of female institutions had manifold consequences for the Maharashtrian women's movement. Firstly, it helped to mobilise women towards the goal of their own welfare. Secondly, it contributed immensely to the transformation of women's roles - from private to the public. This was made possible by the astute leadership of the far-sighted women who founded these organisations. Their ability to 'assimilate and accommodate' as shown above kept the larger Hindu society's criticism of their programmes to a minimal level. In the period 1870 to 1920, when men did not accept women as equals, the creation of a separate public sphere was probably the only viable political strategy. However, the separate female institutions gave their leaders greater autonomy in management and policy-making, while giving their individual members, strength that only numbers and a common platform could provide.

The roots of the separate female institutions rested on the belief in a unique female identity, i.e., pride in their identity as women. They did not reject the domestic ideology but manipulated its fundamental values to suit their new needs. They were no longer just housekeepers: their self-proclaimed superiority in emotional and spiritual matters made them moral guardians of the home; their roles as educated mothers meant that they were guides for the citizens of tomorrow. Their optimistic self-image led them to believe that their effect on public life could only be uplifting. Hindu female leaders like Ramabai Ranade opened new avenues for women's employment by re-defining motherhood. Official and voluntary preoccupation with family, child-care, social work or social welfare opened new areas where their employment was justified on grounds of their greater suitability.

One of the major limitations of separate female institutions was that they were often the only places where women could pursue professional or socially and politically important activities. Their difficulty was compounded by the policies of stronger institutions like the Seva Sadan which restricted its members from participating in nationalist politics. The failure of these institutions in recognising women's aspirations as political beings led to fissures within the women's movement. Ramabai Ranade's astute leadership held it in check but after her death in 1924 large numbers of women defected and joined the male-dominated Congress which promised that their liberation would come with that of the nation.

Having traced the growth of the women's consciousness on gender-related issues and separate female institution building, it is now appropriate to move on to study the various forms of assertion by all classes of women in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER III

WOMEN'S ASSERTION AND RESISTANCE

This chapter analyses the various forms of individual and/or collective assertion by Maharashtrian women in the colonial setting of the late nineteenth century. Their initiative, it is argued arose when they were caught up in negotiating with various kinds of power relations in an everyday context. In the first section, women's role as agents in bettering their lives is approached through their use of a variety of state organs, specifically petitioning. This form of assertion suggests the kinds of power relations which worked to restrict their economic independence, limited their ownership of property and productive resources, controlled their sexuality and restricted their mobility. By their use of petitioning they at once actively responded to and resisted the situation where their role as agents was threatened. When appeals and memorials failed to satisfy their demands, certain classes of women adopted more aggressive forms of agitation.

The second section examines a specific form of symbolic resistance adopted by women in their use of a particular genre of literary writing. Women's folk-songs, novels and plays written during this period re-created a world which turned social reality upside-down. In them we find a world ruled by intelligent and able women, policed by a just female police - in short an equitable world where the deceit and cunning of men is missing. This section has benefited from the rich insights from the growing literature on cultural resistance of subordinated peoples, where scholars have striven to widen the definition of resistance.¹ This chapter extends the perspectives of this literature in several ways. Firstly, it is shown here that resistance was and has remained an important aspect of everyday relations of ordinary women and was a

¹Several scholars especially anthropologists working on Western societies in the early 1970s and 80s demonstrated the various forms of women's resistance and power. Of them, two important works which analyse women's power in peasant and tribal societies are Susan Carol Rogers, 'Female forms of power and the myth of male dominance: A model of female/male interaction in peasant society', *American Ethnologist*, 2:4, 1975, pp.727-55; and Lila Abu-Lughod, 'A community of secrets', *Signs*, No.10, 1985, pp.637-57; also, 'The romance of resistance: Tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women', *American Ethnologist*, 17:1, 1990, pp.41-55. Recently a monograph containing a collection of essays depicting a variety of non-confrontational resistances and contestatory behaviours in South Asia has appeared whose importance lies partly in its inclusion of women's resistances. See O'Hanlon, 'Issues of widowhood', and Oldenburg, 'Lifestyle as resistance', in Haynes and Prakash (eds.), *Contesting power*.

general phenomena. Secondly, there was no disjunction between symbolic resistance and actual resistance. How symbolic resistance as exhibited through a text can and is transformed into actual resistance is demonstrated in the second section. Thirdly, women's ambiguous attitudes towards the state as expressed sometimes by appreciation and at times by anger are explained through examining their interaction with the state throughout this chapter.

Rights to property: Appeals and complaints

Scholarly works on modern Indian history which deal with the mainstream issues of growth of Indian nationalism acknowledge the importance of petitions and memorials in Indian political life long before the Indian National Congress was formed.² In fact, Jim Masselos has argued that early public associations had no entry into the areas of decision-making but impressed their views on the state through petitions and meetings and that even significant agitations like 'no taxation without representation' had their humble beginnings in petitioning.³ In this section, how Indian women learnt the use of appeals and complaints to assert rights is discussed. It is argued here that in the hands of women petitioning became a sophisticated instrument of assertion especially when they had no entry into the male-dominated public associations and when the oppressor was their own menfolk.

One of the most assertive acts of Maharashtrian women rose over their control or ownership of property. Property could involve either agricultural land, houses or businesses such as farms and livestock. Contention over property meant that these women came from wealthy, and in many cases, upper-class backgrounds. In the early part of nineteenth century the establishment of colonial courts of law as well as the right to appeal to executive authorities opened a venue for the successful assertion of women's property rights.

In 1880s the numbers of daughters and widows of sardars (landed elites) administering watans (revenue yielding lands) was substantial, with a total of 61

²E.g., S.R. Mehrotra, Towards Indian freedom and partition, (New Delhi, 1979); J.C. Masselos, Towards nationalism, group affiliations and the politics of public associations in the nineteenth century Western India, (Bombay, 1974).

³Masselos, Towards nationalism, pp.147-55.

including first, second and third class sardars.⁴ The three classes of sardars were classified according to the size of the estate as well as the revenue yield from it. These numbers were despite the highly discriminatory policies of the state in excluding females from inheritance rights of watans. By Regulation XVI of 1827, the government declared that a female could not inherit a watan and further claimed that the ruling was in 'complete harmony with the feeling of the watandars themselves'.⁵ Such a policy was motivated not only by the discriminatory notion that 'watan property ought only to be found in the hands of males, they alone being competent to perform the services required by the state' but also by the state's drive to achieve uniformity and efficiency in the revenue administration.⁶

However, between 1827 and 1868, women especially widows, successfully defied this ban chiefly through two methods. One popular method was via adoption. Widows in Maharashtra could adopt much more easily compared to Bengal as the customary law granted it without any obstacles.⁷ The second method was through the loophole provided by Act XI of 1843 which allowed females to control watans by appointing deputies to perform estate management services. The number of successful cases by which women began to control watans by resorting to the High Court was so great that the case-made law led the government in 1886 to bring in further amendments in the Hereditary Offices Act(1874).⁸

⁴Out of fifty two Sardars belonging to the Class I, nine women managed the zamindari, out of sixty four Sardars of the Class II, twenty-two widows are listed under various jurisdiction while out of ninety one Sardars of Class III, thirty widows are mentioned. None of them are listed as exercising civil jurisdiction within their jaghir and inam villages. Government resolution No. 2363, 23 Jul. 1867 in 'List of the three classes of and widows of Sardars', Vol.84, Comp.No. 1150, (Judicial Department), hereafter (J.D), 1890, (Maharashtra State Archives), hereafter (MSA).

⁵Cited in the Second Reading of the Bill No. 2 of 1885, a Bill to amend Bombay Hereditary Offices Act III of 1874, Vol.24, Bombay Legislative Council Proceedings, hereafter (BLCP), 1886, V/9/2802, p.91, (India Office Library), hereafter (IOL).

⁶Ibid., p.92.

⁷For a more general discussion of adoption and inheritance laws as they affected women's rights, see Sandra Rogers who claims that, 'Hindu widows were pioneers of property rights in Bombay city' through an analysis of property disputes in Bombay city between 1875-1884, 'Hindu widows and property in late nineteenth century Bombay', in Gail Pearson and Lenore Manderson (eds.), Class, ideology and women in Asian countries, (Hongkong, 1987), p.61.

⁸Bill to amend Bombay Watandari Act III of 1874, (BLCP), 1886, pp.59-94, (IOL).

Realising that 'the probability of lapses to the State is remote whilst watandars and their widows could freely adopt sons' the Select Committee appointed to report on the Bill appeased members of indigenous elites by vesting the rights of watans in such a way that only in the lapse of a male heir was the estate to be inherited by females.⁹ During the passage of the Bill, some watandars made blatant, though unsuccessful, attempts to return the watans back to male members when they had fallen into the hands of women by default, with retrospective effect. While indigenous elites made use of the colonial machinery to dispossess women of landed rights they also successfully manipulated various representations of womanhood in empowering themselves. An illustration is their effective argument that the system of appointing only one representative watandar had increased the crime of female infanticide because the great prestige involved in the title of the sardar had hitherto enabled a landholder to get his daughter married to a man of the same rank but in the absence of the privileges of a watandar female lives were endangered.¹⁰

In 1904, the Bombay government tried to place stricter control over female successors of estates and revenue yielding villages by the establishment of a Court of Wards on the ground that women practising purdah could not manage their own affairs. Although it was pointed out by Indian members of the Council that not very many Maharashtrian women were purdah ladies and females who were land-holders had often proved to be able administrators, the state insisted that 'a female subject to the customs which prevail in the country (in this case purdah) may be on that account unable to manage her estate with any efficiency'.¹¹ The same Bill empowered the District Collector to declare a female landholder incapable of managing her property 'on grounds of sex', and this was 'to apply mainly to purdah ladies'. The right to appeal was also withdrawn and such women could not adopt or make wills after their disqualification. What is clearly evident in the successive amendments of the

⁹Ibid., p.93.

¹⁰Bill No. 2 of 1881, to amend Bombay Hereditary Offices Act III of 1874, (BLCP), 1881, V/9/2801, Vol.20, pp.24-34, (IOL).

¹¹Bill No. 1 of 1904 (A Bill to establish a Court of Wards in the Bombay Presidency), (BLCP), 1904, V/9/2806, Vol.23, p.139, (IOL).

Watandari Act is how the erosion of women's power took place firstly by the colonial invitation to indigenous groups to represent the proper sphere of Hindu women's duties and then by the empowering of the state on the basis of these representations of womanhood.

In spite of the alarming restrictions on their powers women from the landed classes were still able to protest successfully against the arbitrary decisions of the state especially in the day-to-day management of their estates. In pre-colonial times watandars had their own military retainers to guard standing crops.¹² After the Rebellion of 1857, the government had ruled for security reasons that no watandars could have arms beyond a certain limit. Several sardar women argued against this regulation and were successful in getting a sanction for more arms. Umabai Saheb Purandhare, a widow of a class I sardar, complained that she was obliged to take out licenses for certain old arms which were heirlooms of the family and which served no purpose other than ornamental value.¹³ Her complaint arose from the fact that aristocratic families resented curtailment of such privileges and more significantly because the Arms Act operated as a tax on such family property. On the complaint of several such widows the Governor-in-Council exempted sardars of all classes from the necessity of taking out licenses for old family heirlooms.¹⁴

Other petitions by sardar widows which were granted were over tax relief and for facilities that would substantially help them to better the administration of their estates.¹⁵ An illustration of such a petition is that by Umabai Bivalkar, widow of a class I sardar of Deccan who stated that her estates produced a revenue of Rs.10,002 a year, of which she paid Rs.6,000 in taxes to the state. In order to protect and guard her standing crops she employed 43 sepoys, each armed with a weapon. However, the District Magistrate of Thane had seized 35 of these weapons and she requested them

¹²H.Fukazawa, 'Maharashtra and the Deccan: A note', in Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (eds.), The Cambridge economic history of India, vol.I, c.1200-1750, (Cambridge, 1982), p.194.

¹³Appeal by Umabai Saheb Purandhare, 25 Aug. 1880, (Bombay Judicial Proceedings), hereafter (BJP), 1880, Vol.P/1591, No.2254, (IOL).

¹⁴Resolution of the Governor of Bombay, (BJP), ibid., (IOL).

¹⁵For tax refunds see petition of Class I sardar, 6 Apr. 1881, (BJP), 1881, Vol.P/1796, no.858, (IOL).

back on the ground that she could not administer her estates efficiently with unarmed guards.¹⁶ The government allowed her to re-claim 16 of the weapons. However, not all appeals were answered satisfactorily in view of the tightening restrictions on the claims of aristocratic women, and quite a few petitions were rejected which related to subjects of inheritance and adoption.¹⁷

Although the state's interests restricted their autonomy women of the propertied classes had begun a process of self-help in the late nineteenth century. Literature was one of the main vehicles wherein they expressed problems peculiarly experienced by their class and also made suggestions for resolving them. One of the more famous literary figures amongst women, Kamalabai Kibe, was from such a family.¹⁸ Many of her shorter works of fiction addressed the problems of upper-class women regarding treachery and deceit over property. Journals edited by women also advised women against signing documents without knowing contents and to refrain from their investing in commercial transactions without proper guidance from trustworthy people. During this period women of the aristocratic class enhanced their public image as well as courted the approval of the government by participating in state-run enterprises for 'women's welfare' like the projects for girls' education and medical relief for women.¹⁹ Many of the earliest women's magazines and organisations received generous grants from upper-class women. An often quoted early feminist among the aristocracy was the Maharani of Baroda, Chimnabai Saheb whose entire staff consisted of women including a secretary and doctor.²⁰

A greater degree of success in asserting rights over property was achieved by

¹⁶Memorial by Umabai Bivalkar, 24 Sept. 1881, (BJP), 1881, Vol.P/1796, No.2682, pp.1016-17, (IOL).

¹⁷Illustrations of this are Lakshmbai and Anandibai Daphle whose petition to adopt an heir to the throne of the state of Jath was turned down, reported in Bodh Sudhakar, 17 Sept. 1892, (Native Newspaper Reports), hereafter (NNR); also see the case of Bayjabai, wife of an Inamdar, who lost her entire estate in Kolhapur to Appa Saheb Jadav, Induprakash, 31 Jan. 1881, (NNR), (IOL).

¹⁸Kamalabai Kibe, 'Samaj chitra Number Ek: Balavriddhavivaha' (Picture of our society Number One: Marriage of an old man with a young girl), Vivadhadnyanvistar, (Marathi), Sept. 1911, pp.113-19, (MMG).

¹⁹See Chapter Two.

²⁰'Naval-Vishesh' (Special News), Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Mar. 1901, n.p., (MMG).

women who came from fairly wealthy backgrounds but who did not belong to the category of landed aristocrats. An analysis of women's petitions over property disputes reveal a great variety of claims ranging from suing for damages caused to their houses or belongings, re-claiming stridhan (women's wealth), special appeals for maintenance of agricultural land, or for re-claiming goods stolen from their property. Several women successfully sued the municipality of Bombay for damages caused to their property through illegal orders of the municipal authorities. Janubai and Pilubai were awarded Rs.2,120 as compensation for land confiscated under the City of Bombay Improvement Act of 1898 and were also successful in reclaiming a further Rs.897 from the Court of the Tribunal of Appeal, Bombay, which had been taken from them as agricultural tax.²¹ Likewise, Mulibai claimed a sum of Rs.501 from the Municipality in a suit for damage caused to her home.²²

There are cases when women successfully intervened in the management of their property. Gangubai Shinde, for example, was able to prevent her father's creditors from demanding a lump sum payment by the sale of her father's property by appealing to the High Court; she thereby secured the right of administration of the estate and this enabled her to deal directly with the creditors. She went to the length of publishing a 'notice' in local newspapers to the effect that she 'alone has the right of effecting a settlement of the claims of the mortgagee and redeeming the property'.²³ Likewise, Danawa, a widow deprived of her moveable and immoveable property by the illegal actions of village officers, who had allowed her husband's property to pass on to her husband's sister's son in her absence, appealed successfully to the government to file a suit in the name of the state on the ground that the village officers' conduct was irresponsible.²⁴ A large number of petitions by widows during the latter half of nineteenth century addressed to the government relate to rights to

²¹Proceedings of the Court of the Tribunal of Appeal appointed under the section 48(3) of Bombay Act IV of 1898, (BLCP), 1907, P/8032, No.40, (IOL).

²²Gujarati, 9 Jun. 1883, (NNR).

²³Vritt Sudha, 23 Sept. 1893, (NNR).

²⁴19 Dec. 1884, (BJP), 1884, P/2423, No.3485, (IOL).

special appeals in the High Court for suits over landed property.²⁵ In many cases women who felt threatened by intrigue and duplicity from members of their extended family and/or friends over property disputes sought the protection of the government and in cases which came from princely states, the government normally directed these petitions to the Political Agent or to local authorities for redress.²⁶

There are several instances when women protested against the removal of their personal property by their husbands like stridhan or over property that provided means of livelihood. Jijabai of Islampur had refused to hand over to her husband's creditors her ornaments, which the law recognised as the immoveable property of women, the maintenance and disposal being entirely in the hands of women. Jijabai petitioned the government to intervene to help her retain her jewels but was told to try the courts.²⁷ On the other hand, women like Nathbai were entirely successful in gaining back lost property. In her petition she demanded the return of livestock stolen from her farm and sold by the culprits. The government resolution was that the state should purchase them back and restore them to her.²⁸

Thus, we observe a process wherein women asserted their legal rights over property in late nineteenth century and actually achieved a fair degree of success in retaining or re-gaining them. We may now proceed to examine assertive acts of women over other issues.

Right to a livelihood: Economic deprivation and agitation

One of the more assertive forms of women's agitation during the late nineteenth century arose due to the economic situation of middle and lower classes. The 1850s

²⁵(BJP), 1884, P/2423, No.3366, (IOL); and (BJP), 1884, P/2423, No.2248, (IOL).

²⁶Petition of Assa, 12 Aug. 1870, (BJP), 1870, P/442/4, No.194, (IOL). Such cases were regularly reported in the vernacular press too. See Hitechchu, 6 Dec. 1879, (NNR).

²⁷28 Jun. 1883, (BJP), 1883, Vol.P/2178, No.2906, (IOL); and petition of Laxmibai Kelkar from Dapholi, n.d., (BJP), 1881, Vol.P/1796, No.1042, (IOL).

²⁸3 Feb. 1870, (BJP), 1870, Vol.P/442/4, No.53, (IOL).

was a period of rising prices especially of agricultural goods.²⁹ While prices of non-agricultural goods, like salt, kerosene, and coal, did not decrease the value of the rupee fell rapidly from 1873 and continued to fall the end of the century, bringing about a depreciation in real wages. The hardest hit were the rising middle classes who had to manage on a small wage income.

Printed literature produced by women during the last half of the nineteenth century is marked by an overwhelming concern with the problems of the wage-earners and the peasantry. Almost every second issue, for example of the Arya Bhagini carried an article on kaatkasar (economy) highlighting the need for minimising the expenses of running a household and calling for more thrift. Their call for reducing expenditure over ceremonies like marriage, puberty and pregnancy rites, analysed in Chapter II was partly due to their concern over the impoverishment of the middle and lower classes. Middle-class women tackled this issue by raising a protest against the older life styles. They demanded an ethic which incorporated new values of dignity of labour and an inexpensive and simpler mode of dress, behaviour and diet. Women were told to stop craving gold ornaments and expensive sarees and invest their money in promissory notes and post office savings deposits. Sewing and embroidery were encouraged in order to economise on tailors. An analysis of fiction written by women illustrates this argument well. 'A story of a home', a semi-fictional account depicts the middle-class home of Narayan Rao who has two daughters and sons who are all receiving education.³⁰ His wife dies but he has no problems bringing up his children as his daughters (who are being educated) are mature and responsible children and take the place of the mother. The eldest daughter, Yamuna, is living with her father as her husband is in Bombay studying for a Law degree. A shadow is cast over Narayan's home when he suddenly faces a reduction in his salary by Rs.5 per month. There is a probability that her eldest brother would have to stop attending College but Yamuna sacks the servants and curtails the expenditure, thus enabling her brother to

²⁹Michelle McAlpin, 'Price movements and fluctuations in economic activity (1860-1947)', in Dharma Kumar (ed.), The Cambridge economic history of India, Vol.II: c.1757-1970, (Cambridge, 1983), pp.878-904.

³⁰ 'Arya Mahila', 'Samsaarathlya goshti' (A story of a home), Maharashtra Mahila (Marathi), Jul. 1901, pp.16-18, (MMG).

continue his education. She also advises her father to sell their house which is old and unmanageable and move to a smaller home. Her father finally takes Yamuna's advice and solves their problems. Thus women suggest a way of letting middle-class families survive and flourish. Even though there is no radical change in the role Yamuna plays yet her education imparts a new dignity to her housewifely status within the home. Meetings were held by women to inculcate the new middle-class ethics: the site varied from plague camps to kirtans (religious discourses) in temples.³¹

It may be safely surmised that power relations between men and women shifted in favour of the former during the last half of the nineteenth century. There was a greater erosion of women's power in domestic circles, especially when wives accompanied their husbands to the city. In the predominantly agricultural households of rural Maharashtra women not only attended to the work of a housewife but were also active participants in farming work. Anandibai Karve attributed the position of authority held by her mother to her grip over the various agricultural operations. Anandibai learned from her mother and mother-in-law the art of harvesting and marketing grain and this gave her a certain amount of autonomy and independent means.³² Within the town and city the middle class woman had to seek new ways of reclaiming her powers and did so by adding new roles to the old role of a housewife. Such attempts however, had a moral rather than an economic value and the test came when the family was suddenly left without a bread-winner.

The utter helplessness in the face of dire poverty caused by the death of the head of the household is recorded in women's petitions to the government. Between 1880 and 1890 hundreds of petitions were sent by women pleading for compassionate allowances, gratuities or employment. The nature of the problems differed from case to case but the overriding link was destitution. For example, in 1884 Mai explained how her husband, a constable working for the Satara police, was discharged from service due to sickness with a gratuity of Rs.50. She took a job as a domestic help and 'has struggled since then to maintain herself, her sick husband and four children with

³¹Kashibai Shingane, 'Plague campatil hakeekat' (What took place in the plague camp), Maharashtra Mahila, Feb. 1901, pp.86-91, (MMG).

³²Anandibai Karve, Maze Puran (My Autobiography), (Marathi), (Bombay, 1944), p.32.

difficulty, but is now quite broken down by her hard labour to support her family.'³³ She requested employment for her eldest son 'who knows to read and write Marathi and is quite willing to do any menial work'.³⁴ Doolumbee, on the other hand whose husband had died after putting in 23 years service in the Satara police department, petitioned for an allowance because she was 'childless, and alone and quite destitute for the means of support'.³⁵

Quite a few petitions were by women demanding compensation for the loss of their husbands' lives in the execution of public duties - for example while opposing Bhils (tribes) or dacoits (bandits) or from accidental killing by European soldiers.³⁶ These speak volumes for the assertion by women and their awareness of compensatory rights. Compensation was usually demanded either in the form of money or employment for one of the family members who had agreed to look after the widow in return. There are several instances when the state granted up to Rs.300 as compensation or agreed to employ the eldest son in the department where the widow's husband had worked.³⁷

The economic hardships of middle-class women were starkly depicted too in their attempts to claim pensions for the services of their husbands who had died a few months before becoming eligible for pension rights. In many cases, the Magistrate forwarded the petitions to the Governor recommending the 'case as a hard one', and making them special exceptions especially when the widowed mother or wife had a large family of children and depending on the number of years served by the petitioner's son or husband.³⁸ Many middle-class men in professions like teaching had left their villages for good and in times of distress their wives could no longer

³³Petition by Mai Bor, 4 Jun. 1884, (J.D), 1884, Vol.96, Comp. No.1201, (MSA).

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Petition by Doolumbee, 21 Feb. 1884, (J.D), 1884, Vol.96, Comp. No. 1433, (MSA).

³⁶E.g., n.d., (BJP), 1883, Vol.P/2177, No.158, (IOL).

³⁷Petition by Premabai, 11 Apr. 1885, (BJP), 1885, Vol.P/2651, No.970, (IOL); and petition by Thukoobai, 22 Apr. 1871, (BJP), 1871, Vol. P/483, No.154, (IOL).

³⁸Petition of Gajah Mannugiri, n.d., (BJP), 1883, Vol. P/2177, No.1899, (IOL); and petition by Parbutee, n.d., (BJP), 1884, Vol. P/2423, No. 3161, (IOL).

depend on either the natal or marital home. The family of Kero Lakshman Chhatre, a famous Professor of Mathematics of Fergusson College was a good example. His widow's appeal was successful in securing a pension worth Rs.100 per month which prompted other widows to quote her case in arguing their own.³⁹

The economic recession caused by falling real wages affected lower-class much more than middle-class women. Economic historians have shown how machine-made goods coming from England had destroyed indigenous handicrafts. Traditionally women had worked alongside men as cotton spinners and weavers since the family had formed the unit of production.⁴⁰ The change in the economic scene had a dual negative effect on them. In 1896, due to the slackness of the weaving trade, two thousand weavers with their wives and children were reported to have left Solapur in order to find new jobs.⁴¹ A great number migrated to larger cities in search of employment. The women themselves were left with a skill that no longer was in demand and were now in the position of either seeking menial jobs or being completely dependent on their husbands.

One of the remarkable trends in women's search for a livelihood during this period was the bid made by lower-class women for survival. These women faced new forms of harassment in towns and cities. The vernacular press reported the harassment of vegetable vendors, mat-makers or fish-sellers by police officials.⁴² Often, such women sought the help of the vernacular newspapers in publicising their grievances. Parvati Navar, a fish-seller, wrote a letter published in Vengurla Vritt asking for protection against the police Patel who oppressed vendors like herself who did not sell their goods at the prices dictated by him.⁴³ A mat-maker complained that a police constable had threatened her on a trifling issue and extorted a bribe of Rs.10 from her,

³⁹E.g., Parvatibai Kunte's petition, 22 Dec. 1888, (Bombay Education Proceedings), hereafter (BEP), 1889, Vol. 3559, No. 164, (IOL).

⁴⁰V.D.Divekar, 'Western India', Dharma Kumar (ed.), The Cambridge economic history of India, pp.346-49.

⁴¹Sholapur Samachar, 31 Oct. 1896, (NNR).

⁴²E.g., Dnyanodaya 10 Feb. 1877, (NNR); Dnyan Prakash 21 Apr. 1877, (NNR).

⁴³Vengurla vritt, 17 Nov. 1883, (NNR).

while a newspaper from Chikodi carried a complaint from a vegetable vendor who was assaulted by two police officials when she had refused to leave her wares in a spot directed by them.⁴⁴ Both the corrupt practices and harassment of the police officials were everyday experiences of lower-class women which arose at least partly due to the speed through which new legislation brought new taxes and partly due to the lack of awareness of the illiterate larger masses. A great number of vendors in towns and cities were unaware of the fact that licenses were required by municipal authorities for practising their trade as well as new taxes introduced on professions like wood-gathering or salt-making. For instance, in 1878, in the town of Nandgad an uniform levy was introduced on fuel-wood, the chief means of livelihood in that area.⁴⁵ Many women who defied the new taxes were fined for their lapses. There are instances when such acts of defiance by women were not only noticed but their cause fought for at higher levels of the administration. In 1887 the constant complaints of female hawkers and vendors reported in the vernacular press were taken seriously by Indian elites and sub-section(2) of section 314 of the Municipal Law, which prohibited, 'hawking articles of human food without a license from the commissioner', was revoked through the efforts of K.T. Telang and Pherozechah Mehta.⁴⁶

This brings us to the question of the authenticity of the letters and petitions. It may be said that they were written by the help of male members or friends of the family but it is doubtful whether the petitions would have materialised without the volition of the women themselves. Some of the petitions reveal a woman-centred concern which points to the woman being the agent herself. Premabai, for example refused on emotional grounds, the offer of a post in the army for her son from the government as her husband who had been a subedar was killed in a skirmish.⁴⁷ Likewise Fatmabi argued that even though she had re-married, her first husband's

⁴⁴Samsher Bahadur 17 Feb. 1877, (NNR); Chandrakant 24 Nov. 1894, (NNR).

⁴⁵Native Opinion 9 Mar. 1878, (NNR).

⁴⁶See the proceedings of the Bill No.4 of 1887, 'A Bill to consolidate and amend the Law relating to the Municipal Government of the city of Bombay', (BLCP), 1887, Vol.25, pp.44-45 and the final reading and passing of the Bill in (BLCP), 17 Mar. 1888, Vol. 26, pp.133-34, (IOL).

⁴⁷Petition by Premabai, 20 Mar. 1885, (BJP), 1885, p.408.

pension should continue until the wedding of her daughter from her first husband's marriage, as her second husband had refused to maintain the girl. Under the Civil Pension Code pensions lapsed if the widow re-married yet the Accountant-General found the argument of the widow sound enough to make a favourable report to the government.⁴⁸ As many of the women petitioning the government were illiterate, how did these women gather such information? It is likely that women especially middle-class women gained access to information, through informal women's networks. It has been shown in Chapter Two how women used to organise halad-kunku parties where such information was possibly disseminated. Susan Harding has studied the relationship between 'gossip', and formation of gender identities among illiterate peasant women which gave women opportunities to think and articulate.⁴⁹ Such a process was visible amongst nineteenth century Indian women, too, as illiterate women seemed to know precisely the extent of help they could claim from the state. Cornelia Sorabji, who worked as an appeal lawyer in Baroda was constantly amazed by the manner in which she was approached for legal advice by village women.⁵⁰ Women's sub-cultures seem to be widely prevalent in nineteenth century Maharashtra and it is very likely that they formed the basic source of information for women.

Rights as parents and to re-marriage

During this period increasingly women asserted their rights as mothers or wives, the former for custody of children and the latter either for release of husbands or for the right to re-marriage. In all these cases women's acts reflect a pattern of assuming responsibility as mothers or wives or for individual happiness.

In 1880, Khutizabee pleaded for the release of her step-son from the Sassoon Reformatory where he had been committed for stealing two bunches of bananas. She

⁴⁸ 17 May 1883, (J.D), 1883, Vol.3, Comp. No. 652, (MSA).

⁴⁹ 'Women and words in a Spanish village', in Rayna Reiter (ed.), Toward an anthropology of women, (New York, 1975), pp.283-308.

⁵⁰ She cites a particularly interesting case when she was approached by the sister of a woodcutter's wife who had been arrested on false charges of hacking her husband to death. When Cornelia's mother, Franscina had enquired her source of information, the latter replied that everyone knew that Franscina had a 'ballister (barrister) daughter'. Cornelia Sorabji, India Calling, The memories of Cornelia Sorabji, (London, 1934), p.59.

asserted her right as his natural guardian in the absence of his father and was allowed to take her son away on the promise that she would be responsible for his good behaviour.⁵¹ In a similar case, Sai asserted that her son's health was deteriorating in the Juvenile Reformatory and offered to give security for his future good behaviour and to train him as a farmer.⁵² Women asserting their maternal rights were usually successful unless they involved the state issuing warrants against a third person as in the case of Heerabai who pleaded that the government should issue a warrant against the Manager of a Dramatic Company who she insisted had lured her minor son away from home.⁵³ In such cases the government normally directed the petitioner to try the courts.

Sometimes women took over roles normally associated with male heads of households. Women asserted to rights which included being responsible for the harmony and well-being of the family. For example, there are many petitions where women agreed to look after their husbands, provided the state reduced prison sentences on them or went to great lengths in order to persuade the government to reduce sentences.⁵⁴ In quite a few cases sentences were reduced for convicted men on the statements of wives. Begum Bebee's petition, for example, showed the effort she had put in to establish her husband's reputation as a good citizen when she sent reports to the Governor of the many good services he had performed in jail, like saving the life of the jailor at the risk of his own life.⁵⁵ The government instituted an inquiry to verify her statements and, finding them true, reduced Abdul Hamid's

⁵¹31 May 1880, (BJP), 1880, Vol. P/1491, No. 1575, (IOL).

⁵²n.d., (BJP), 1885, Vol. P/2651, No. 723, (IOL).

⁵³Petition by Heerabai Davar, 21 Jan. 1880, (BJP), 1880, Vol. P/1591, No. 527, (IOL).

⁵⁴Umanai's wife was able to convince the government to release her husband from the Colaba Lunatic Asylum when she agreed to provide security and promise that he would not harm others or himself in future: 30 Jun. 1871, (BJP), 1871, Vol. P/483, No.155, (IOL); Petition of Rangabai Deshmukhin, who got her son's sentence reduced from seven to five years, 30 Jul. 1885, (BJP), 1885, Vol. P/2652, No. 2049, (IOL).

⁵⁵8 Jul. 1871, (BJP), 1871, Vol. P/483, No. 182, (IOL); Jumnabee's petition, 22 Nov. 1870, wherein she enclosed a report of her husband's good conduct from the Superintendent of Port Blair and was able to get his sentence reduced drastically from transportation for life to seven years imprisonment, (BJP), 1870, Vol. P/442/4, No. 195, (IOL).

sentence.

One of the more significant trends during this period was the aggressive resistance by women over the issue of marital rights. Resistance may be defined as an act inspired by consciousness when rights are over-ridden accompanied by a perceived sense of injustice. Women asserted their right to re-marriage when their own interests were trampled on or were ignored by the state.

In the nineteenth century the power of the caste councils was gradually undermined. In the early part of the century the opinions of a few select learned Pandits were consulted and Digests of Muslim, Parsi and other minority religions were prepared for the guidance of the courts. Caste councils were known popularly to grant the right to re-marriage for women under special circumstances, for instance when husbands had been convicted on life charges or had deserted their wives and had not appeared over a period of seven years. But in the British courts of law, the codified Hindu and Muslim personal law were interpreted rigidly.⁵⁶ Thus the judiciary enforced an extremely linear view of Indian tradition while the erosion of caste council power meant the death of a flexible customary law. Such a linear view and rigid enforcement of law had resulted in uprooting some of the traditional rights of women.

Middle-class women active in public life publicised the issue of marital rights but a quieter battle was being waged by all classes of women in the courts or by petitioning the government against the injustice of child-marriages and discriminatory laws against women. Many Hindu women who had found ways of acting as free agents in redressing their marital problems were prevented from doing so by the interference of the courts. Bhagi, a Hindu woman was convicted and sentenced to three months' imprisonment for having married a second time during the life-time of her first husband. She had argued that she had good reason to do so because her first husband had not only ill-treated her but had left her and re-married thus depriving her of support.⁵⁷ Bigamy had been outlawed but the courts in their efforts to strengthen

⁵⁶C.A. Bayly, Indian society and the making of the British Empire,(II.1), (Cambridge, 1987), p.115.

⁵⁷Bombay Chronicle, (NNR), 22 Jul. 1882. A very similar case was that of Abai, Jame Jamshed, (NNR), 9 Aug. 1884.

the British judicial apparatus had refused to recognise the authority of a caste to declare a marriage void or to give permission to a woman to re-marry in the absence of the consent of her husband.⁵⁸ Ganga, a Hindu woman had converted to Islam before marrying Kasim, but the court ruled that Hindu law did not consider a marriage dissolved merely by apostasy and without the consent of her Hindu husband her second marriage was illegal. Ganga was imprisoned for three years thereafter. Many women who on the authority of caste panchayat had obtained permission to divorce and re-marry faced various terms of punishment for repudiating British laws. A woman belonging to the tailor caste had petitioned the High Court to grant her judicial separation from her husband but her case was dismissed by Justice Candy on the ground that Hindu law does not allow the severance of the matrimonial bond. In another case a woman was convicted for bigamy even though she argued that she had the authority of her caste-panch to re-marry when she produced reasonable evidence to show her husband's inability to fulfil marital duties.⁵⁹ In effect, British law upheld the theory that a Hindu woman could not be a responsible individual.

Benibai had been married to Ranchhod at the age of eighteen months and when he grew up he turned out to be a simpleton who did not understand the responsibilities or obligations of a marriage. Her father-in-law would not consent to her re-marriage to which she had a customary right according to her caste rules. She had appealed twice, once to the District Magistrate who directed her to apply to the Governor. In her petition she pleaded that she was 26 years old and that she had realised that

There is not the least chance of receiving a bit of worldly enjoyment from Ranchhod.... Now I leave it for His Lordship to consider how am I to pass the bloom of my life with a lunatic who can afford no sort of worldly enjoyment. I request His Lordship to relieve a distressed, wretched woman ordering Ranchhod to divorce me, his wife and allow me to perform a Natra with another man

⁵⁸See the judgment of the case *Regina vs. Bai Rupa and Regina vs. Shambhu Raghu*, quoted in judgment in the case of *Imperatrix vs. Ganga*, wife of Gosavi, 29 Jan. 1880, (J.D), 1880, Vol.17 and 18, (MSA).

⁵⁹Subodh Patrika, 17 Nov. 1894, (NNR).

according to our caste custom.⁶⁰

Benibai's situation was that in the absence of caste authority she was forced to appeal to the government in order to avoid a case of bigamy as defined by the colonial laws. Abandoned or neglected wives or child wives whose husbands were on life terms petitioned for the annulment of marriages, on grounds of 'unnatural widowhood', once they realised the centralised control of British law courts but without success.⁶¹ In effect, colonial courts tried to establish greater control over female sexuality but the large number of cases that reached the courts wherein women defied the rules shows the resistance put up by women.

Rights to profession and mobility: Sexual harassment and kalavatis ('singing and dancing girls')

One noticeable development in the late nineteenth century was the rapid increase in incidents of sexual harassment of women in public places. Vernacular newspapers of the period contain profuse accounts of indecent assaults and obscene remarks and jokes aimed at women using bathing-ghats, in temples and pilgrimage centres, on trains and buses.⁶² In short, what is observed during the late nineteenth century is the beginning of the contemporary Indian phenomenon popularly known and officially recognised as 'Eve-teasing'. Women's physical mobility had increased greatly and was facilitated by railways linking the hinterland with major towns and cities. The largest number of complaints came from female travellers using the Western Indian Railway services regarding the misbehaviour of guards, ticket-examiners and male passengers.

A remarkable change that came through the acts of assertion of women to their right to travel was the improvement in transport services. Written complaints by women who had faced sexual harassment were taken seriously by the government. For example, in 1880, a Parsi woman travelling from Neemuch to Bombay was assaulted

⁶⁰19 Apr. 1883, (J.D), 1883, Vol. 115, Comp.no. 683, (MSA).

⁶¹Petition of Yemmenne, 17 Nov. 1880, (J.D), 1881, Vol.48, Comp. No.305, (MSA); Jaya's appeal, 11 Dec. 1887, (J.D), 1887, Vol.49, Comp. No.112, (MSA).

⁶²Hitechchu, 11 Nov. 1876, (NNR); Guzerat Mitra, 21 Apr. 1877, (NNR).

by a European guard and on her complaint the guard faced a reduction in his salary as well as transfer from passenger to goods train services.⁶³ Constant complaints of women were taken heed of and railway travel for women was made safer when the Bombay railway authorities employed women to issue, examine and receive tickets from female passengers as well as ensuring the safety of female passengers in segregated compartments.⁶⁴

British rule in Maharashtra brought major changes, most of them adverse, in the class of women professionals known as kalavatis (accomplished women) or kulavantinis ('women of genteel birth').⁶⁵ There were four sects among them - Naikins, Bhavins, Kasbins (also known as Kunbins) and Murlis.⁶⁶ They were trained in the arts of dancing, singing and sometimes in playing musical instruments. Naikins were also well-educated women who could read and write Marathi and compose poetry.

The lives and professional pursuits of these classes of women became precarious under colonial rule and they faced oppression both from the indigenous people as well as repression from the state. Aspiring middle-classes during the social reform period had started a cleansing movement which included removing practices like the nach (visiting the houses of singing and dancing girls) which increasingly

⁶³21 Dec. 1880, (BJP), 1880, Vol. P/1591, No. 3335, (IOL).

⁶⁴Bombay Samachar, 11 Feb. 1882, (NNR); Satya Mitra, 15 Feb. 1896, (NNR).

⁶⁵Several accounts are available on their professions but the most detailed is in K.Raghunathji, 'Bombay dancing girls', in Indian Antiquary, Vol. 13, Jun. 1884, pp.165-78.

⁶⁶The first two came from Goa and surrounding villages. Naikins usually placed themselves under the protection of one man, like an ordinary married woman and passed the greater portion of her time in singing and dancing. Their property rights indicate them to be a matrilineal society. They were held in high esteem by Hindus. Some of them were wealthy enough to hire Brahmin priests in their service as well as indulge in charitable causes. Bhavins were married women who had forsaken their husbands and were in the service of idols in temples. They were expected to live as ascetics but often they combined temple duties while having a single master. Kasbins came from agricultural castes, therefore called Kunbins and were purchased by wealthy men. They performed the duties of ordinary wives and sometimes could gain freedom in consequence of good conduct and occupy a separate house and cultivate their own land. Murlis, came from Jejuri and were dedicated to temple-gods.

were defined as immoral.⁶⁷ These women who were in pre-colonial times invited for house-warming, birth-day, thread ceremonies by ordinary households were now shunned.⁶⁸ In the respectability drive of the Maharashtrian middle-classes saw to the re-definition of kalavatis as prostitutes.⁶⁹ Residents of various towns and cities often sent complaints to the Police authorities to remove kalavatis from what they considered as 'respectable neighbourhoods', and house them outside the city or town limits.⁷⁰

Middle-class women, not surprisingly were also part of this cleansing movement. By condemning kalavatis as ordinary prostitutes they were able to secure two objectives. The most obvious was to prevent men from the practice of keeping mistresses by making the practice dishonourable. Secondly, there was a drive among middle-class women to impute more value to the old role of a grihini (manager of the house) in urban areas. One way was to usurp the skills of kalavatis. They argued that when their menfolk came home tired from the weary business of the public world, the women could help them ease their worry and stress away by singing or by playing a soothing tune on a veena (musical instrument similar to sitar). Consider, for example, the passionate speech by Sundarabai Shirur at the Second Social Conference of Bombay Presidency in 1901. To quote her on this issue:

Considering the fine arts and skills, we notice that in our society, they prevail amongst women of the lowest caste and that makes a very unfavourable impression of our society. The status of such arts should be raised in society. A man is not an animal that is satisfied with plenty to eat and drink. That man has a rare gift which we call his mind. Beauty, sweetness of speech and elegance are experienced by him

⁶⁷Vernacular newspapers are full of reports which urge police authorities to convict Naikins and prevent them from bringing up their children in the same profession, see Kaside Mumbai, 21 Aug. 1878, (NNR); Dnyanodaya, 16 Dec. 1876, (NNR).

⁶⁸Raghunathji notes that Hindus used to hold the Naikin in such high esteem that she was requested to string the mangala-sutra (a black bead necklace symbolising Hindu woman's married status) on weddings, 'Bombay dancing girls', pp.167-68.

⁶⁹Subodh Patrika, 24 May 1884, (NNR); Bodh Sudhakar, 1 Oct. 1887, (NNR).

⁷⁰Nagar Samachar carried a complaint by Ahmadnagar residents against prostitutes. Reported in 23 Feb. 1878, (NNR); Dandio, 22 Mar. 1879, (NNR).

and he enjoys it... And if such qualities are unavailable in his home then he automatically is inclined to seek them elsewhere...⁷¹

Therefore, she implored that those skills should be taken away from the 'practice of individuals of low mentality', and vested in middle-class females. Magazines and journals edited by middle-class women echoed the views of Sundarabai, justifying learning Indian classical dance and music by their female children. The re-defining process aimed to turn kalavatis into prostitutes and middle-class housewives into accomplished house-managers.

Many kalavatis also experienced repression from the state through the working of the Contagious Diseases Act.⁷² The utter lack of privacy and intimate intrusions into their personal lives was resented by them. Above all the medical checks and detention in lock hospitals greatly threatened the practice of their profession. Naikins, were equally subject to caste rules. They were subject to fines by their caste-head for lapses and even though their caste changed according to their protector's it did not include the mlechcha (foreigner).⁷³ Some Naikins had already faced oppression from their caste members when they had been forced to cater to the Portuguese rulers in Goa and eventually migrated to Bombay due to the stigma attached to them.⁷⁴ Thus their horror of being examined by European doctors were well-founded.

Many kalavatis launched a multi-pronged protest against the rules and regulations of the Contagious Diseases Act. A large number of them petitioned collectively arguing that the Act made no distinction between concubines provided for by a single Indian employer and prostitutes plying their trade with European soldiers.⁷⁵ Chima, a Kusbin from Belgaum, argued that she was not a 'common

⁷¹'Schemes and efforts', Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Oct. 1901, pp.154-55.

⁷²For details of the Act see Chapter One.

⁷³K.Raghunathji, 'Bombay dancing girls', p.165.

⁷⁴Ibid., p.167.

⁷⁵Petition from Myboobajee Naikin and others, professional dancing and singing girls of Poona, contained in a letter, 13 Dec. 1871, Commissioner of Police, Poona, (BJP), 1871, Vol. P/483, No. 158, p.55, (IOL).

prostitute but an accomplished singer of ballads by profession', and therefore should be exempted from the operation of the Cantonment Act.⁷⁶ They pleaded for a more accurate definition of terms like that of 'prostitutes' and to exclude those amongst them who did not cater to non Indians due to rigid caste rules and who lived outside the cantonment area.⁷⁷

When their petitioning failed to bring satisfactory answers many prostitutes skirted the rules by leaving Bombay for nearby villages during the day using the tram services and returning in the night to ply their trade.⁷⁸ Indiscriminate force used against these women and abuse of power by police officers was often reported when kalavatis defied them.⁷⁹ Many of those who defied rules were arrested, convicted and fined for not presenting themselves for medical examination under the Cantonment Act of 1868. In 1871, twenty seven singing and dancing girls of Bombay were arrested and jailed for a week and each was fined Rs.25.⁸⁰ Kalavatis were indeed fighting a losing battle not just with the state but more so with the indigenous elites whose patronage they were being deprived of by the usurpation of their skills by middle-class women. A great number of women plying this profession searched for new avenues of employment and found them in the growing Marathi theatre.⁸¹

Women's resistance through literature

Acts of symbolic resistance were widely expressed in Maharashtra by women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The medium of expression was

⁷⁶12 Feb. 1870, (BJP), 1870, Vol. P/442/4, No. 41, p.15, (IOL).

⁷⁷Some vernacular newspapers pointed out the difference between 'mistresses' who were referred to as 'respectable women', as opposed to prostitutes; Karnatak Mitra, 18 Jun. 1881, (NNR), (IOL).

⁷⁸This method of avoiding being subject to the checks under the Act was successful as out of 4000 of them only 600 had registered; Indu Prakash, 11 Sept. 1880, (NNR); Kaside Mumbai, 25 Sept. 1880, (NNR).

⁷⁹Dnyan Prakash reported how a Naikin in Poona defied six mounted police and three foot soldiers, 7 Jun. 1879, (NNR).

⁸⁰(BJP), 1871, Vol. P/483, No. 30, p.10, (IOL).

⁸¹Kaside Mumbai carried an article on how Naikins were being employed in Dramatic Companies as actresses, 13 Aug. 1881, (NNR).

predominantly literature and especially through the use of a specific genre of writing where symbolic inversion of roles dominated the plot of the novel, play or folk-song.⁸² The reasons for the popularity of this genre of writing for women was probably because expression of repressed desires could emerge in women's narratives as creations of fantastic or utopian worlds - a medium acceptable to male censors.⁸³

In 1913 Girijabai Kelkar wrote a five-act play entitled Purushanche Band (Men's rebellion), the location of which is revealed as a 'place somewhere in Hindustan'.⁸⁴ All the events take place in a kingdom ruled by a king called Sadhu Singh, who under the influence of a misogynist monk drives out all the women. The latter form their own parallel kingdom wherein all roles are assumed by women from the Queen to the soldiers guarding their domain. Although there are other novels written during the same period by women which have similar plots this play has been chosen for analysis as the most representative of this genre of literary writings.⁸⁵ It is representative, firstly, because it fits well into the conventions of symbolic inversion through complete role reversals and its use of the literary notions of parody, irony and paradox - core elements of this genre of writing. Secondly, it poses a challenge to social control and attacks the established order by situating it in the context of the problems of the contemporary women's movement in Maharashtra.

The themes in Men's Rebellion bring out a great number of the tensions in

⁸²Barbara Babcock the editor of an important monograph on 'symbolic inversion', has broadly defined it as 'any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion present an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political', and it is in this sense that role reversals are analysed in this section. For a study of a variety of symbolic inversions in Western societies see the collection of essays in Barbara Babcock (ed.), The reversible world: Symbolic inversion in art and society (Ithaca, 1978).

⁸³Susan Friedman has analysed convincingly the way 'the return of the repressed' takes effect in women's narratives in keeping with censorship rules through the study of a cluster of texts by Hilda Doolittle in 'The return of the repressed in women's narrative', Journal of Narrative Technique, Vol. 19, 1989, pp.141-56.

⁸⁴Even though its first appearance is in 1913, the second edition is used here which was reprinted in 1921 and published by Induprakash Press of Bombay.

⁸⁵For examples of other writings by women, see the novel Palkicha Gonda (The tassel at the centre of the Palanquin) by Kashibai Kanitkar published in 1928 but which appeared serially in a popular Marathi journal called Navayug in 1913.

gender relations and the anxieties and resentments of women. Thus the issues of women's higher education, the need for at least a degree of economic independence, rights to inheritance and maintenance, women's sexual rights and their social status form the bulk of the play's concerns. The playwright herself states explicitly why she embarked on this project. When Girijabai was visiting some friends in the town of Bhagur during the course of a heated discussion with friends she accused men of doing nothing to change the 'condition of women' and had argued that it was so 'because men held women as inferior to them'.⁸⁶ On this comment of hers, one of her male friends had replied that it was due to the fact that the demands of contemporary women had made men rebellious. She immediately took a decision to write a play based on the discussion and entitle it as 'men's rebellion'.⁸⁷ She further states that:

Men blame women for the backwardness of the nation and allege that social reform is stagnating because women refuse to educate themselves. According to them women are ignorant and superstitious but I say this is not an in-born defect of womanhood, in fact, what is happening today is that very few people rise on their own merit, a majority of the population needs to be pushed to improve themselves and this is exactly what menfolk do not do - that is, encourage and stand behind women.⁸⁸

She explained that her work was offered in the spirit of correcting the society of her times and, 'make men realise their duties and recognise their shortcomings'.⁸⁹ The reason why she chose to write a play rather than any other form of literary writing was because it would reach a wider audience through enactment on stage.⁹⁰

⁸⁶See foreword to Girijabai Kelkar, Purushanche Band (Men's Rebellion), p.1.

⁸⁷Ibid., p.2.

⁸⁸Ibid., p.2.

⁸⁹Ibid., p.2.

⁹⁰Girijabai had in fact written a book where many of the themes touched upon in Men's rebellion had been discussed but this she felt had reached only a privileged few who were educated enough to appreciate it. See, Striyancha swarga (Women's paradise), (Bombay, 1921), 1st ed., 1912.

An important point in the play is that the world is not turned upside-down by a deliberate act of women. The state of events turn topsy-turvy when the King comes under the influence of Vikarananda, a learned priest who incessantly harangues him with arguments that 'women are the gateway to hell', 'the 'barbed fence around reason', and 'once man gets entailed in her coils he can never escape the cycle of re-birth and never attain salvation'.⁹¹ Any sort of relationship with a woman he compares with that of housing a cobra and feeding it with sweetened milk!⁹² Eventually the King decrees that no man in the Kingdom will get a job or be allowed to practice any profession unless he leaves his wife.⁹³ Overnight the King turns ascetic and much to the distress of the Queen goes away to live in Vikaranand's ashram. Except for one sardar (landed elite) the entire male population sign a contract stating that they would not have anything to do with the female sex and then drive their wives out. Yashwant Singh, the lone sardar to disobey the King, makes a statement that only those men who treat their wives as slaves would agree to such a degrading contract and refuses to be part of it. While resigning from his post he tells the King that since he views his wife as an equal he cannot abide by the King's proclamation.⁹⁴

What follows is a state of anarchy in the kingdom of men. There is utter lawlessness, an increase in crime and chaos and confusion. Chandrakant, the heir to the throne, receives many petitions by cloth-merchants, goldsmiths and other tradesmen who complain bitterly about the great losses to their enterprise as their main clientele were women.⁹⁵ More significantly men in all professions seem to work inefficiently and the author cleverly shows what ensues. Without their womenfolk, most of them bear the dual burden of tending to household chores as well as to their business. When the angry King demands an explanation from his head gardener

⁹¹Men's rebellion, p.2.

⁹²Ibid., p.4.

⁹³Ibid., p.10.

⁹⁴Ibid., pp.25-26.

⁹⁵Ibid., pp.67-68.

regarding the palace-gardens showing an unkempt appearance, the latter retorts, 'How can you expect a man who spends most of the night baking bread and looking after four children to work well throughout the day?'.⁹⁶ Thus in the world-turned-upside-down by men there is disorder and inefficient administration - a creation of men alone.

If the kingdom inhabited by men is in chaos what is happening among women? The women gather around their leaders for direction and support. The main female protagonist is a remarkable single woman, Saraswatidevi, who is a puranika (female preacher learned in Hindu scriptures) as well as a Western educated woman. She convinces the distraught Queen to take the reins of the female kingdom in her hands. Interestingly, she is able to convince the Queen by using the arguments of action and duty towards humankind from Lord Krishna's famous discourse in the Bhagavad Gita (part of the epic Mahabharata and considered by Hindus as a holy book).⁹⁷ Saraswatibai's right hand is Kumudini, daughter of a noble who is a modern woman with ideals of women's emancipation. Together they had opened a large number of women's organisations and a Hospital for Women. They are now able to organise a large number of women's welfare schemes under the patronage of the Queen. Under the orders of the King the tradesmen do not have any business dealings with women. However, in no time women assume all responsibilities and manage the mercantile, banking, oil and cloth manufacturing and trading and other trades. The role reversals are so complete that coachwomen appear with whips, female soldiers in male attire and so on. The women's kingdom prospers and runs efficiently.

What is the function of sexual inversion here? When women reverse roles and act like men they prove themselves to be as good or better than men in public life and therefore as deserving as men in social status. A second function served by role reversal is contesting men's arguments about women's inferiority in intellect, reasoning and administrative abilities. In Saraswatidevi's rhetoric it translates as 'women being equals to men, and if there is difference to be found between the sexes

⁹⁶Ibid., p.56.

⁹⁷It is not uncommon among women's subcultures in India to use the epic literature in distinctly female ways in order to subvert authority. For a study of a women's Ramayana, see V.N.Rao, 'A Ramayana of their own: Women's oral tradition in Telugu', in Paula Richman (ed.), Many Ramayanas: The diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia, (Berkeley, 1991), pp.114-36.

it is merely one that nature endows us with'.⁹⁸

The rebellion of men instigated by the king's decree serves other functions too. Initially most of the women express anger, resentment or shock when their menfolk order them out of their homes. It is only Saraswatidevi endowed with a vision, who is happy with the rebellion. The larger part of her life had been in the service of the upliftment of women and on many occasions she had countered opposition from conservative women. The Raja's proclamation, she thought was a boon because:

Men's rebellion has demonstrated to women what the former think of them!! Now the women are enraged because they have come to realise their inferior status. They have also been driven to prove their worth and through their own efforts have gained confidence. It is now firmly impressed on their minds that their progress depends on them alone.⁹⁹

This transformation in women is best observed through the intellectual growth of Janakibai, wife of a Brahmin priest. Initially she is portrayed as a traditional woman who believed in the Hindu notion of a pativrata.¹⁰⁰ Janakibai, therefore condemned strongly non-conformist single women like Saraswatibai and Kumudini who defied them. However, Janakibai's world crumbles when the Raja's decree leads her husband to kick her out of the house without as much as an apology. We hear Janakibai's sarcasm as she tells him while leaving, 'Now your true colours are out. You are a fine man, indeed! What great depths is your love for your wife! What returns for the many years of seva (service)!'.¹⁰¹ She then wholeheartedly plunges into the emancipatory programmes of the female leaders.

While women like Janakibai have arrived through a painful process of experience there are others who were not as naive or trustful of their husbands yet had

⁹⁸Girjabai, Men's rebellion, p.124.

⁹⁹Ibid., pp.52-53.

¹⁰⁰For an extremely detailed study of this prescriptive Hindu notion through a eighteenth century Sanskrit text, see Julia Leslie, The perfect wife: The orthodox Hindu woman according to the Stridharmapaddhati of Tryambakayajvan, (New Delhi, 1989).

¹⁰¹Girjabai, Men's rebellion, p.32.

not been provided with an opportunity to prove that they could manage well on their own. The men's rebellion provided outlets for women from the lower classes to protest which in normal times were denied to them through the exercise of sheer brute force. Thus the soldier's wife, the cook's wife and the gardener's wife are not too unhappy about their husbands abandoning them. This feeling is echoed by the malin (female gardener) who says:

See, we women work so hard. A lot harder than men do. I am the one who plucks the flowers and makes the garlands. Only when it comes to grabbing the salary and spending it on liquor, it is only this area that he (referring to her husband) specialises in. And, if I protest he beats me... Serves him right. Now not only will I earn but I will keep it too. I will be rich enough to make my own jewels too.¹⁰²

Girijabai uses the literary technique of the comic to draw out themes of sexuality and patriarchal notions of ownership and right to a woman's body. There are several amusing scenes which actually carry serious reflections on the above mentioned issues. One such incident takes place at the dead of night when a neighbourhood is woken by a woman's screams for help. Several policemen on patrol arrive and handcuff the thief despite his protestations to the effect that he has not committed any crime as he is in his own house and the woman who screamed for help is his wife. When the bewildered policemen question her, she replies that since her husband had broken the marital bond by signing the King's contract he is now a stranger and regards his entry into 'her' house as illegal and his demand for sexual intercourse as 'molestation'.¹⁰³ The King punishes the enraged husband for his lapses.

Eventually the women triumph. This happens when the heir-apparent is seriously injured in a car accident and some female passers-by bring him to the women's hospital where he is nursed back to health. When the King hears this news he comes to the hospital to thank the doctors. What follows is a confrontation between

¹⁰²Ibid., p.50.

¹⁰³Ibid., pp.78-83.

Saraswatibai and Vikarananda, the holy man who has misled the King.¹⁰⁴ The debate between them is conducted at several levels. Firstly, both opponents fall back on the scriptural injunctions on the rights and duties of the sexes and Saraswatidevi ably matches Vikarananda's learned rendering and for every example he cites wherein women spell doom for men's path to salvation she provides ten to the contrary. At another level she compares and contrasts the administration in the men's kingdom to that of the women's and demonstrates how inefficient the former was. She lets the men know that every woman in the kingdom 'prefers complete independence' rather than follow men who are under the 'influence of a man with half-baked ideas like Vikarananda'. There is a twist in the plot at the end when Saraswatidevi exposes Vikarananda who happens to be her husband but who had absconded from marital duties leaving behind a child-bride to fend for herself. The King is now completely convinced of his own folly and that of Saraswatidevi's wisdom: he begs forgiveness and so does Vikarananda.

Saraswatidevi's final words of advice to the heir-apparent are that, 'God created the sexes and He treats them as equals. They are blessed with equal intelligence and equal rights. If one sex tries to rule the other it will end in chaos'.¹⁰⁵ To this advice the heir to the throne replies that he will try to make sure that no injustice will take place against the female sex in future. Thus by sexual inversion women help to clarify the problems in contemporary society. It also extends behavioural options for women when through formal means they are able to exercise power and protest against an unjust social order. It is significant that the inversion of roles by women is not to mimic men and male conduct in society but as a correction, a pointer to men to show them that society can be a harmonious place with both sexes sharing equally the joys and sorrows of life.

Women's song-books also show an irreverence to authority among women's sub-cultures. Many songs depict women rebelling against a repressive popular moral philosophy and revelling in fantasies of wish-fulfilment. It is worthwhile discussing one of them in some detail. In a song entitled, 'A venerable old lady', four daughters-

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, pp.109-23.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, p.116.

in-law, who are infertile and sexually frustrated women, oppressed by a disciplinarian mother-in-law and suspicious husbands, not only indulge their sexual appetites, but take revenge on their husbands and mother-in-law.¹⁰⁶ One day the four sons decide to go out of the village to attend to some business. Before they leave they strictly warn their mother not to let their wives out of the house - not even to the river-bank to fetch water. 'You know the ways of the cunning murari (Krishna)', they tell her. As soon as they leave, the mother-in-law locks the women in the house, much to their chagrin.

That night Krishna appears in the form of an old woman and seeks refuge at the house. The mother-in-law welcomes the woman, who tells her that her name is Krishnabai and that she is on a pilgrimage to Kashi. The mother-in-law tells her that the daughters-in-law are unable to conceive and asks the old woman to pray on their behalf. That night Krishnabai moans that her body aches and the mother-in-law sends the daughters-in-law to look after her. The old lady transforms into four handsome young men, who spend the night 'entertaining' the daughters-in-law. At dawn Krishna smears the mother-in-law's nose with lime-powder (a mark of shame), before disappearing.

Folk songs often substituted revered mythical figures for ordinary men to get past male censorship.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, the image of the amorous Krishna is used here. This particular song brings out several themes. Besides the more obvious ones of repressed desire and resistance to the social control mechanisms of their mother-in-law and husbands, they are resentful about the popular notion that if women cannot conceive than it is somehow their fault. The dominant structures do not allow questioning of men's virility or physiological inadequacies. The women thus rebel against several strictures at one stroke and revenge themselves. Several songs use the comic principle to mock or ridicule social customs like dowry and attitudes of in-laws

¹⁰⁶'Matari' (A venerable old lady), in Vishnu Parashuram Shastri Pandit (ed.), Strigayansangraha athava bayakanchi ganyai (A collection of women's songs), (Marathi), (Bombay, 1882), pp.103-6. This song appears without any significant changes later in Parvatibai Gokhale (ed.), Stri geetratnakar (A collection of women's songs), (Marathi), (Poona, 1912), pp.11-13.

¹⁰⁷For another example the song, 'Vakadi vat' (A warped course), in Parvatibai Gokhale (ed.), A collection of women's songs, (Marathi), pp.136-37.

towards their womenfolk.¹⁰⁸ Thus women's literature is an important vehicle for acting out forbidden desires, rebelling, disputing or at least commenting on the existing order of things.

Symbolic resistance as expressed through literary works like Girijabai's play did possess potential to effect changes in society by forcing people to think and act on them. Girijabai's motive in deliberately choosing to write a play rather than a novel becomes clear when it is observed that it was enacted many times on stage and reactions and responses, negative and positive were expressed on it.¹⁰⁹ In this sense, literature which subverts authority can at times possess more than a 'steam valve' effect for subordinated peoples.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

By the turn of the century assertion by women was occurring in many different ways. Women resisted the attempts of Indian men and the colonial state to control their sexuality or trample on their rights to property, professions, a better standard of living and marital rights. One of the methods of agitation which women increasingly used was petitioning and appealing to the state. Women found the public instrument of petitioning rewarding in many cases, unless their requests clashed with government policy, as in the case of female sardars and kalavatis.

In the second section, the ways in which women developed strategies of resistance through literature has been demonstrated. Women during the nineteenth century wrote profusely using the literary conventions of drama, novel and folk-songs. The social protest evident in the literary writings of women were aimed at the dominant indigenous groups. They addressed the question of power imbalance in gender relations, they attacked the patriarchal values which gave unlimited sexual

¹⁰⁸ 'Sasubaichisamajavani' (Appeasing mother-in-law), in Shamrao Moroji Naik (ed.), Strigeeetmala athava striyanchi manoranjak gani (Collection of women's songs or songs for women's entertainment), (Marathi), (Bombay, 1882), pp.55-58.

¹⁰⁹ In Jalgaon itself, where the author stayed for a while, a theatre group called Shri Bharat Drama Co. staged it several times and even among stage artistes there was resistance to it, see Preface by K. Kolhatkar to Girijabai, Men's rebellion, p.9.

¹¹⁰ A classic formulation of the 'steam valve' effect demonstrated through rites of rebellion is Max Gluckman, Order and rebellion in tribal Africa, (New York, 1963).

rights to men, commented on the social conditions which hampered women's education and questioned social customs like that of dowry. The use of the literary technique of sexual inversion and the comic principle filtered their messages in an acceptable form to society while the preference of drama to novel as a means of literary communication imbued symbolic resistance with the potential for actual resistance. This has been demonstrated through the responses to Girijabai's revolutionary play when it was enacted in various towns and cities of Maharashtra. Finally, women's literature which subverted authority at various levels was also a vehicle of consciousness-raising among women.

The theme of women's resistance is further explored in women's crimes to which we shall turn in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN AND CRIME

In the 1970s several categories of 'crime' were re-defined as important kinds of social protest in South Asian history.¹ The study of crime has continued to receive attention yet the links between crimes by or towards women and gender relations have not sufficiently engaged the attention of scholars.² In this chapter it is proposed to study how notions of crime and criminality effect the lives of women and how certain offences by women when located in unequal power relations assume the character of protest or resistance to oppressive societal structures. Certain forms of behaviour and violent acts of women classified by the criminal justice system as 'crimes' are analysed as arising from changing gender relations and their intersection with wider social and political relations in colonial India.

Violent forms of assertion by women will be looked at through an analysis of women's crimes. Crime, it will be seen, was often a method of struggle available to subordinated groups, in this case for women in oppressive situations. It is argued here that acts of violence by women are ways of countering extreme cruelty subjected on them by men, manifested through the chastising acts of wife-beating, branding and cutting of noses of wives on suspicion of adultery. Specific acts of violence like poisoning husbands by wives and infanticide arose, it is argued here, largely as protests against social customs which increasingly restricted women's access to re-marriage.

One significant feature of this study is to reflect on why the state and the

¹See David Arnold, 'Dacoity and rural crime in Madras, 1860-1940', The Journal of Peasant Studies, 6:2, 1979, pp.140-67; see also Anand Yang (ed.), Crime and criminality in British India, (Tucson, 1985).

²A study which claims to analyse the criminal justice of the East India Company in India in order to understand the structuring of the legal relationship between state and subject and through that the broader relations between the colonial state and society fails to do so in regard to 'women's crimes'. For example, the categories used to study issues such as sati are 'religious toleration' (Indian society), versus 'public authority' (state) and for female infanticide it is 'rank' (Indian society) versus 'law' (state) which do not illumine any aspects of how the offence affects the life of the female involved in these offences, her voice, or even why such 'crimes' became matters of significance to the evolving state. See Radhika Singha, 'A "Despotism of law": British criminal justice and public authority in North India, 1772-1837', Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1990, especially chapter Three.

judicial apparatus were interested in re-inscribing crimes, like that of infanticide, on the social canvas of nineteenth century Maharashtra, and what functions it served. Also, the motives behind the participation of indigenous elites in the debates surrounding issues of women's chastity and right to re-marriage will be looked at. An analysis of these issues is undertaken here in order to understand how the fight for power between the state and indigenous groups proved to be the cutting edge in the re-structuring of gender relations.

Women of 'criminal castes and tribes'

A visible deterioration occurred in the lifestyles of women belonging to various groups due to the colonial policy of classifying certain communities as 'criminal classes'. Women belonging to the Kaikadis, Kaddi Korva and other communities were classified in colonial documents as engaged in the hereditary professions of house-burglary, thieving in trains and fairs or as actively assisting their menfolk in dacoity.³

M.F. Billington, a journalist who visited Indian prisons and talked to female prisoners has recorded that 'an extraordinarily large number of the female offenders are in prison for receiving stolen goods'.⁴ Although susceptible to the colonial stereotyping of 'criminal minds' in certain castes and tribes of India, Billington concluded that 'it is fairer to judge her as a victim to her circumstances than as a law-breaker on her own account'.⁵ The reason she gave was that such women could not defy their husbands especially if their menfolk threatened them with brute force. When large numbers of males belonging to these classes were arrested and transported, their womenfolk were treated harshly. Under these circumstances, the women were reduced to utter poverty due to the seizure of their lands and homes and often appealed to the state for help. But the government dismissed their claims to their property as fabricated or because the goods were suspected to be stolen.⁶

³M.Kennedy, Notes on criminal classes in the Bombay Presidency, (Bombay, 1908), pp.10, 26.

⁴Mary Frances Billington, Women in India, (London, 1895), p.242.

⁵Ibid., p.242.

⁶See the resolution of the government to the petition of Ghania and eleven other women, 4 Oct. 1883, (BJP), 1883, Vol.P/2422, No.269, p.103, (IOL).

That economic motives were particularly important in women's assertive acts is revealed in their petitions. Often women did not appeal for the lives of their husbands but instead for the fields or the ornaments on the persons of their husbands. It was destitution that urged women to assert themselves in this way.⁷ The economic distress of such women was heightened once their husbands were convicted on charges of dacoity (gang robbery) and pillage because such crimes invariably carried a sentence of death or transportation for life. Bhimi, the wife of a dacoit, along with five other wives, appealed for the return of ornaments and for the confiscated fields belonging to their husbands. They pleaded that due to the conviction of their husbands, they and their children were facing the 'bitterest pangs of starvation and destitution'.⁸ Joint petitions from groups of women appealed for the release of their husbands. It is significant that many of these appeals are made not on the basis of the innocence of the men concerned, but to save themselves and their children from death through starvation.⁹

In the criminal justice system of nineteenth century India the philosophy of punishment seems similar to the system in the metropolitan state. This is illustrated with regard to the maintenance of the death penalty and the frequent use of mercy through an elaborate system of appealing and petitioning to the executive authorities.¹⁰ Female offenders were treated in exactly the same way as male convicts under the Indian Penal Code. Women convicted of grave crimes such as murder, forgery and arson faced capital punishment which could be converted to transportation for life if their appeals were successful. For all other less serious offences a varied sentence of rigorous imprisonment (hard labour) or simple imprisonment was given.

⁷Hunger and starvation were important motives for bandits in times of famine and high prices of foodgrains. This has been demonstrated by David Arnold, 'Dacoity and rural crime in Madras, 1860-1940', pp.145-49.

⁸Petition of Bhimi and others, 29 Dec. 1883, (J.D), 1884, Vol.42, Comp.No.267, (MSA); see also petition by Crustnabae and others, 5 Apr. 1870, (BJP), 1870, Vol.P/442/4, No.80, (IOL).

⁹Petition signed by 17 wives of dacoits headed by Ghaina, n.d., (J.D), 1884, Vol.96, Comp.no.267, (MSA).

¹⁰For a discussion on the functions of the criminal justice system in England during the eighteenth century, see Douglas Hay, 'Property, authority and the criminal law', in D. Hay, et.al. (eds.), Albion's fatal tree: Crime and society in eighteenth century England, (London, 1975), pp.17-63.

Female juvenile offenders and pregnant female convicts were treated with more care. Female convicts under eighteen were not transported to the penal colonies until they reached the age of maturity. Likewise, a pregnant female convict was not hanged until the delivery of the child. Female convicts known to be 'lunatics' were confined in asylums rather than prisons. Changes in penal practice were linked with the changing relationship between the power of the state and the resistance of the people, both women and men, as will be demonstrated in the following sections.

Husband poisoning, wife-beating and uxoricide

One of the most common acts of resistance by women which were defined as 'crimes' were violent acts committed by them usually against their husbands and the method most commonly resorted to was poisoning their food.¹¹ This particular offence discloses the extreme imbalance in power relations between the sexes as well as reflecting the repressive nature of social customs for women. Often, acts of violence by men, such as cutting noses of wives, branding and wife-beating, drove women to retaliatory acts of violence against their husbands. Sometimes social institutions like that of polygamy led to poisoning of co-wives too.

Extra-marital liaisons were in many cases given as the reason for the killing of husbands by wives.¹² The absence of divorce among higher caste Hindus and/or the lack of consent by the husband among lower castes to grant separation, left few options to a woman who wanted to enter a relationship with another man other than her husband. In the previous chapter, it has been demonstrated how social restrictions on women's autonomy in marriage matters had tightened due to the changes in the shape of the criminal justice system which endeavoured to make caste-panchayat power ineffective.¹³ Some women, especially child-wives, poisoned husbands in

¹¹I have come across only one case where the wife attacked her husband while he was sleeping with a sickle and killed him. She was hanged despite her protest that she had been driven to protect herself against her husband's constant cruelty to her. Ambi kom Dhavji's case is reported in detail in Mahratta, 27 Jul. 1895, (NNR).

¹²See petition of Changi, 4 Jan.1870, (J.D), 1870, Vol.59, Comp.No. 1277, (MSA); and the petition of Chanda kom Bala, 1 Jun.1889, (J.D), 1889, Vol.5, Comp.No.2825, (MSA).

¹³See section 'Rights as parents and to re-marriage', of chapter Three.

protest against their natal and marital family especially when forced into repugnant marriages.¹⁴

Wife-battering, as it is known today, was common in nineteenth century India.¹⁵ Extreme cruelty by men against their wives also led to husband poisoning since women were culturally (as well as physically) conditioned not to fight back with violent means. By illustrating the degree of cruelty by husbands towards wives we can understand how desperate women could have been driven to murder them. For example, Yamaji Tulsiram had caused grievous hurt to his wife with a hot iron. In the proceedings of his case it transpired that 'the accused had tied up his wife to a beam and branded her in six places, her breasts, between her buttocks and the calves of her legs'.¹⁶ In another case, Balabhai Rajubhai had chopped off his wife's arm and leg and his rationale was that 'he was only trying to correct her'.¹⁷ But the townspeople testified that his wife was a chaste woman and that Rajubhai used to beat her savagely causing her to run away to her father's house. Disfiguring wives by mutilating them through practices of cutting off noses and branding can be presumed to be common methods of cruelty justified by men as methods of correction or chastisement and the monopoly of this form of punishment was invariably in the hands of men.¹⁸ It can be appreciated from this why more assertive wives were driven to kill their husbands in a desperate attempt to save themselves.

So far a rather stark picture of Maharashtrian domestic relations has emerged. It is not suggested here that all acts of extreme cruelty by men led to wives poisoning

¹⁴See the case of Mohona Kom Mahadu whose desperation can be measured by the fact that she refused to appeal against her sentence of transportation for life, in (J.D), 1883, Vol.87, Comp.no.1088, (MSA).

¹⁵The Vritta Sudha, a newspaper from Satara reported that wife-beating and branding was increasing at an alarming rate so much so that among the kunbis (agricultural castes) it was actually considered an 'act of manliness' to do so., 4 Mar. 1893, (NNR).

¹⁶Proceedings of the case are in 'Return of cases in which sentences have been enhanced by the High Court on review, reference or appeal from 1 Jan. 1878 to 10 Sept. 1885', hereafter (Return of cases), (J.D), 1885, Vol.99, Comp.No.532, (MSA).

¹⁷(J.D), 1884, Vol.30, Comp.No.24, (MSA).

¹⁸Four-fifth of the cases that came up for enhancement of penal sentences were about violence towards women, in (Return of cases), (J.D), 1885.

their husbands. On the contrary, women were quick to assert themselves in more positive ways by using the prerogative of appeal. The state considered all forms of mutilation and disfigurement such as branding, whipping and cutting parts of the body as a threat to its own monopoly of physical authority. Any such act of violence by one individual against another was considered a 'crime'. Thus, cutting off noses and branding wives were deemed offences. There are numerous cases when wives asked for a review of a judgement on the grounds of 'miscarriage of justice'. While some were successful in getting the sentence enhanced from one year's rigorous imprisonment to seven years transportation others were not so fortunate.¹⁹ Sometimes judges were prone to view acts of violence towards women with leniency especially when erring husbands showed what was termed 'genuine remorse'.²⁰ Thus it is probable that in many such cases wives who had already been subjected to a great degree of abuse may have resorted to poisoning their husbands.

In certain cases the judge remitted a portion of the sentence on a woman convicted of poisoning her husband. This was done in a spirit of upholding the values of Hindu society or as a measure of family discipline. This is made clear in the case of *Veni vs. Dew Ramji*.²¹ The Judge remitted a portion of her sentence (from transportation to five years' hard labour) and on her conviction and eventual release she had to secure a bond to the effect that she would remain under the protection of her husband for the rest of her life. A breach of this meant she would have to fulfil the unexpired portion of her sentence.

The judiciary always identified poisoning of husbands by wives with unchastity even though this was not always the case. Nor did they take into account the social context in which such acts took place. On the contrary, in the case of uxoricide, the

¹⁹For a successful case see the proceedings of the sentence on Krishna bin Sakha in (Return of cases), (J.D), 1885, (MSA); on the other hand the wife of Govinda after being subjected to abuse through a nose-cutting incident by her husband had complained to the District Commissioner about the acquittal of her husband and the government concurred with the Magistrate in thinking that an appeal to the High Court uncalled for. See the proceedings in the case of *Imperatrix vs. Govinda* in (J.D), 1880, Vol.17, Comp.No.5782, (MSA).

²⁰For example Hari Sakharam was imprisoned for only three months hard labour after he had disfigured his wife by cutting her nose, which he admitted was done in 'a fit of jealousy'. In (J.D), 1881, Vol.49, Comp.No.1252, (MSA).

²¹(J.D), 1882, Vol.137, Comp.No.1098, (MSA).

same criminal justice system was quick to recognise the rights of a husband when it accepted murder of a wife by the husband even on inconclusive evidence of adultery by the wife.²² The Governor and the judges' Minutes in such cases of uxoricide reveal that male offenders were given lesser terms of imprisonment on the grounds that the man had murdered his wife 'in a fit of passion', defined as 'extenuating circumstances'. It is clear that the colonial state not only recognised but also upheld the rights of a deeply entrenched patriarchal society.²³

To a large extent the social position of a wife depended on her ability to win the affection and sympathy of her husband. This was the case whether it was a question of maintaining a balance in power relations with a co-wife or mother-in-law or even to command respect within the marital home and the larger society. Folk-tales and women's song-books depict the sadness and stress of an unlucky woman who failed to do so.²⁴ Some women believed that the love of a husband could be re-kindled by administering aphrodisiacs in their meals but quite often this resulted in tragic consequences.²⁵ While some women were given sentences of a few years in prison, others received harsher treatment. Akku for example, received a sentence of transportation for life. She appealed against this, stating that the real circumstances of her misfortune were as follows:

²²See for example the widely reported case of the Crown Prince of Udaipur who had murdered his wife on the mere suspicion of adultery. This case came to be known as the 'Chhota Udeypur case', and is interesting because it reveals how unanimously vernacular newspapers sympathised with the offender. Often other cases were reported which were also discussed lauding the man's actions on the grounds that it is 'in keeping with the Indian notions of morality and honour', and 'death alone was the proper punishment for female unchastity'. See Dnyan Prakash, 23 Oct. 1880, (NNR); Bombay Samachar, 23 Oct. 1880, (NNR).

²³See judgement passed by the Sessions Judge on Bhola, 22 Jun. 1879, (J.D), 1880, Vol.45, Comp.No.632, (MSA); see the case of Bhikia bin Dharma, who had murdered his wife and her lover yet had his sentence reduced from capital punishment to transportation for life when he petitioned, 19 Aug. 1881, (BJP), 1881, Vol.P/1796, No.2010, (IOL).

²⁴(Compiler unknown), Striyan va mulikarita sangeet sundar gani (Songs of women and girls), (Marathi), (Ratnagiri, n.d.), pp.100-01; Vishnu Parashuram Shastri Pandit (ed.), A collection of women's songs, (Marathi), song no.48, pp.128-29.

²⁵Basava, who had asked her father to give her 'some medicine which would bring back the love of her husband', was supplied with some poisonous substance. Her husband survived but she was sentenced to five years rigorous imprisonment; (J.D), 1885, Vol.38, Comp.No.764, (MSA).

I did not knowingly administer poison to my husband. As my husband did not like me I mentioned the circumstance to a neighbour named Ramu bin Babaji who told me that he would give some substance to me and that if I administered the same to my husband with food, my husband would start to like me... Had I known that the powder was a poison and that it was injurious to life, I would not have done so.²⁶

In spite of this plea her petition was turned down. Instances of women unwittingly poisoning their husbands by giving them 'magic powders and potions', which they had procured from quack medicine-men and priests, are narrated in advice manuals written by women during this period.²⁷ The ignorance and naivete of women were major issues of concern for middle-class women as seen in Chapters One and Two where feminists sought to tackle illiteracy and superstition through education programmes for women.

The use by women of chemicals like arsenic, lead and powdered glass or poisonous herbs and seeds also came through a knowledge of medicines passed on through generations. Women's song-books refer to the cycle of reproduction with an amazing accuracy of detail and precision as well as advice on parturition etc. Here the recipient was not always the middle-class educated woman but illiterate village folk.²⁸ Thus the case of Veni, who had mixed some herbs with her husband's meal to cure him of epileptic fits, ended in his becoming ill and she was sentenced to five year's R.I.²⁹ There were convictions of elderly women, usually mothers and great aunts, who were concerned about the health of their family members. In 1880, a Parsi mother-in-law received a sentence of nine months' rigorous imprisonment for branding her daughter-in-law, though she claimed it had been done only to cure the girl of a

²⁶ Akku's petition, 20 Nov. 1890, (J.D), 1890, Vol.70, Comp.No.174, (MSA).

²⁷ Pandita Ramabai, Prescribed laws and duties, (Marathi), pp.74-75.

²⁸ 'Gane garbhakhand varnan' (Songs of pregnancy and delivery), in (Compiler unknown), Songs of women and girls, (Marathi), pp.67-70 and pp.74-81, (MMG). Also songs on 'Dohale' (The longings of pregnant women) and 'Palan' (child-birth rites) in Shamrao M. Naik, Collection of women's songs, (Marathi), pp.62-77, (MMG).

²⁹ Proceedings of the case of Veni vs. Dew Ramji in (J.D), 1881, Vol.46, Comp.No.793, (MSA).

nervous disorder.³⁰ The petition of Savitri is particularly illuminating. She had given her daughter some medicine to help rid her of syphilis and thus save herself from disgracing her in-laws. However, in her anxiety she had forgotten to tell her daughter to apply it externally while she had taken it orally with the result that she was poisoned. Even though the daughter recovered the mother was transported for ten years.³¹

Women often found themselves in a position where they were forced to fight for the attention of their husbands when they happened to be second or third wives. Squabbles and intrigue were common in polygamous households. That the institution of polygamy often led to tragic circumstances is highlighted by one such offender who appealed against the High Court judgement thus:

I am scarcely advanced in years or experience, being nearly only twenty-five years of age. My caste is polygamous and I had the misfortune to have had the complainant as a rival wife of my husband. Would that the system of polygamy never have existed in India or that I was never born in a polygamous society; I have now to leave not only my native land and my dearest relations but I have now to leave behind two infant sons to the mercy of any wife that my husband fancies to take...³²

In Kashi's case, she was convicted of attempting to poison her co-wife Baji and her daughter. The entire case rested on the statement of Baji whose daughter was killed. Both the assessors in her case ruled that the evidence was contradictory and that either Baji or Purshotram (the husband) could have caused the death. However, such cases were common enough for the judge to view any statement by co-wives as highly suspect.

If women resisted social constraints through a recourse to murder, women prisoners resisted prison discipline for a variety of other reasons. In 1885, a high-caste

³⁰Petition of Dhunbai, 28 Mar. 1880, (J.D), 1880, Vol.49, Comp.No.354, (MSA).

³¹Imperatrix v. Savitri, (J.D), 1884, Vol.46, Comp.No.1352, (MSA).

³²See the proceedings in the case of Kashi in (J.D), 1885, Vol.35, Comp.No.378, (MSA).

female convict in Ratnagiri jail complained to the Magistrate during a trial that female prisoners were ill-treated and tortured. A high level inquiry was set up, following an agitation stirred up by the vernacular press.³³ A joint petition of the female prisoners revealed that they were ordered to do scavenging work and, since they belonged to high castes, they had refused and went on a hunger strike, upon which they were, 'put in stocks', and forcibly fed. The inquiry resulted in the employment of sweeper caste female convicts to do sanitary work. While the tussle between Indian men and the colonial state can be seen as an attempt to control the body of the female, women's resistance was also a struggle against an alien oppressor forcing them to engage in practices which they found culturally repulsive. This was mainly because non-observance of these customs entailed grave consequences for women on their release. In fact, this was made clear by one of the female convicts. Kashi Bhandari argued that the state owed her fifty rupees because she had been obliged to do scavenger's work since, on returning home after her release, her husband refused to remain with her. The village people put her out of caste, and she pleaded that 'my poor father had therefore to borrow 50 rupees, to defray the expenses for the ceremony of bringing me back to the caste'.³⁴

The rationale behind such resistance is similar to the rioting by female convicts in England during 1853 and 1859 when they revolted against the conversion of their sentences from transportation to imprisonment.³⁵ In England women released from prison suffered more stigma than men and consequently found it more difficult to find employment. Hence they preferred to be sent to Australia where they felt they could start life afresh. The revolt of the female prisoners in Maharashtra similarly was directed to ensure that what happened in the prison did not adversely affect their life after their release. The dogged protests by Maharashtrian female prisoners and their

³³Petition by 'Sitaram Gangaji and one hundred and forty-eight other Marathas, Bhandaris and Guraos, inhabitants of Ratnagiri', 18 Jan. 1886, (J.D), Vol.33, Comp.No.659, (MSA). A summary of it was published in several vernacular newspapers like the Subodh Patrika and Maharashtra Mitra, 15 Apr. 1886, (NNR).

³⁴Petition by Kashi kom Bhikoo Bhandhary, 7 Mar. 1886, to Governor-in-council, (J.D), 1886, Vol.33, Comp.No.659, (IOL).

³⁵See Michael Ignatieff, A just measure of pain: The penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850, (New York, 1978), pp.138, 203-4.

astute alignments with the local press and population ensured that prison authorities relented by issuing regulations respecting the caste rules of female convicts.

Women asserted their right to live their lives in the best way known to them and maintained their right to pick from the limited choices available to them. However, the state had made devastating inroads into the domestic lives of Indians and had begun to exercise immense control over the body of the female in various ways. A more general resistance to it by women was imminent as will be examined in the next section.

Infanticide: The colonial authorities and indigenous elites

The 1880s was a decade when the vernacular press began to report an increasing number of women being arrested and charged with infanticide. The emerging female intelligentsia noted it and took action in various ways.³⁶ Some women were angry about the government's tendency to arrest women for this offence and were sufficiently moved to write treatises questioning contemporary gender relations as Tarabai Shinde had done. Others began to agitate through women's organisations. Thus, on 11 June 1883, the Arya Mahila Association, a prominent women's organisation of Bombay Presidency, argued a case for the establishment of a home for abandoned wives and destitute widows. Writing to the Governor of Bombay, Pandita Ramabai, an influential member of this organisation, complained that in recent years abortion and infanticide were being attributed only to women. According to her:

...it does not enter the mind of anyone that a great share of this sin rests on the shoulders of men. The whole blame of the matter is being thrown on women alone, even though the men that do it know the common saying that it requires two hands to clap...³⁷

In the early 1870s the interest of the colonial authorities in the active suppression of female infanticide had waned and been displaced by the more general phenomena of

³⁶See Chapters One and Two.

³⁷Petition of Arya Mahila Association, 11 Jun. 1883, to 'Hon'ble Sir Bartle Frere Saheb Bahadoor', n.p., (ICMM).

infanticide. This displacement was accompanied by a shift in the gender of the penal subject. In the case of female infanticide, normally the cheiftains or male heads of households were held responsible, while in the case of infanticide, increasingly the mother became solely answerable for the commission of the act. One of the main lines of enquiry here is to examine the imperatives and priorities by which the courts vested responsibility for the offence in women.

By the 1870s the Bombay government had introduced a system of information-gathering for the detection of infanticide through the systematic registration of pregnancies by unmarried women and widows, investigation of unusual deaths of infants, close checks on the movements of midwives and prostitutes and through promises of rewards and promotions to police officials.³⁸ These operations resulted in a series of convictions of Brahmin widows in the 1870s. A consequence of this was a public protest from Maharashtrian men. How the body of the Indian woman became a site for the exercise of colonial power, and resistance to it, will be studied here.

A great deal of tension is revealed between the dominant discourses, as represented by the colonial authorities, and the indigenous elites over the debates on infanticide. However, it is suggested here that, despite the contestatory nature of the conflict, by simply concentrating on the dual nature of female sexuality (i.e., chaste/virtuous as opposed to unchaste/infanticidal), they exonerated men from the responsibility of parenthood outside marriage and diverted attention from female poverty by focusing on notions of 'shame' and 'honour' for Brahmin widows. By contrasting the penal approach to customary practices towards infanticidal women, an attempt will be made to show how this resulted in the deterioration in the position of Indian women. Finally, an attempt is made here to reconstruct the nature of the relationship between the act of infanticide and its social context, through the vast store of petitions by women convicted for the crime. This study was made possible by the discovery of more than a hundred petitions by female offenders. The voices of these resistant women did not significantly alter their sentences nor did they play a role in the shaping of the dominant discourses which claimed to know them. However, they

³⁸This system of surveillance had started as part of the operations for the suppression of female infanticide in Gujarat. See D.D., Wilson, History of the suppression of infanticide in Western India, (London, 1855), pp.115, 125.

are crucial because they present a vastly different picture of who committed infanticide and the motives for the act from that presented by men.

In recent years, scholarly analyses of major legislative enactments like the Age of Consent Act of 1891 have drawn attention to the fact that the Act challenged male control over female sexuality in Bengal and was an attempt to display British moral superiority in India.³⁹ It is argued here that the debates that arose over infanticide in the 1870s and 1880s, while revealing a basic antagonism of culturally constructed notions of gender, also served a significant political function. The discourses generated by the fierce debates on female sexuality in these decades formed a cutting edge which helped define the power relations of the coloniser and the colonised.

In 1876, Dinbai, a Parsi widow reputed to be from a 'respectable family' of Bombay was charged with infanticide after the police were tipped-off about it. The High Court passed a death sentence on her and the midwife who carried out the act. In April 1881, Vijayalakshmi, a Brahmin widow, aged twenty-four was convicted of killing her newborn illegitimate infant and sentenced to death.⁴⁰ On both occasions a public debate began with vernacular newspapers publishing the growing number of convictions for the crime of infanticide. In 1872, statistics revealed that 406 women were tried for the offence in the North-West Provinces, while in the Bengal, Madras and Bombay Presidencies the corresponding figures were 197, 77 and 15 convictions.⁴¹ In 1882, the corresponding figures were 227, 309, 373 and 203. The figures for Bombay Presidency are comparatively lower but over the decade the jump from 15 to 203 was a dramatic increase. It seems pertinent to ask why the British felt the need to investigate infanticide in this way and why they tried to establish a knowledge of Indian female sexuality.

Throughout the late nineteenth century consistent efforts were made by the

³⁹See Dagmar Engels, 'The Age of Consent Act of 1891: Colonial ideology in Bengal', in South Asia Research, 3:2, Nov. 1983, pp.107-134.

⁴⁰All the correspondence between the Governor-in-Council and the Judges, petitions by Vijayalakshmi and extracts from newspapers are to be found in (J.D), 1881, Vol.46, Comp.No.1036, (MSA).

⁴¹These figures are taken from a table showing the statistics for convictions of infanticide in five provinces during 1870-1884, in Mahratta, 25 Jun. 1887.

British to recreate, review and defend their authority through coercive means. The debates on infanticide were enrolled in this service providing the authorities with exemplary narratives of the superiority of the civilised West over that of the depraved sentiments and debased civilisation of the East. Discussions over infanticide and its direct link to prohibition on widow remarriage gave the British authorities the opportunity for a strategy of cultural control over Indian society. They served to emphasise the strength of British rule in India. As Justice West said in delivering judgement on Vijayalakshmi, 'If the caste prohibition to remarry encouraged infanticide the caste ought to withdraw it'.⁴² The judges argued that the Hindu masses would interpret the removal of the penalty of capital punishment for infanticide as removal of the prohibition on widow re-marriage. The Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 was practically a dead letter. But by passing capital sentence on Hindu women committing infanticide, the colonial power found an effective coercive method of gaining the submission of the Indian castes into adopting the standard norms of domestic and social life set by the English in India.

It would not be an exaggeration to consider the judicial structures during the late nineteenth century as an effective mechanism of power while the police added a disciplinary function to their role as the auxiliary of justice in the pursuit of infanticidal women. This was a complex relationship linking the absolute power of the state to the lowest levels of power disseminated in society. Female offenders provided an entry into the forbidden space, allowing police to intervene where they were normally shut out, i.e., the Maharashtrian home. The colonial authorities sanctioned and encouraged the judiciary and the police to speak about female sexuality. In the process, through definitions of the sexuality of infanticidal women, their continuous registration and observation, it formed a formidable body of negative knowledge about Indian female sexuality to be deployed in its claims to rule.

Representations of Maharashtrian female sexuality by the judges emphasised the want of maternal affection in Indian women and their lack of control over instincts considered base in civilised society. Justice West summed up this attitude pithily:

⁴²Proceedings in the case of Vijayalakshmi, (J.D), 1881, Vol.46, Comp.No.1036, p.343, (MSA).

...the accused must have known when she indulged her lust, or yielded to the indulgence of the lust of someone else, that these dire consequences might follow; and what was the value, either morally, or from any point of view of sensibility which was sufficient to make a woman destroy her own offspring, but which was not sufficient to guard her against the indulgence of her lust.⁴³

The judges maintained that in all the cases that had come to court during 1881, the ordinary associations which clustered around the ideal image of a woman had been entirely perverted by Indian women. According to the Victorian notion of female sexuality, a woman was a helpless, tender, and feeble creature with every gentle feeling strongly developed in her by nature. Now, the judges argued, they were being asked to vest these desirable attributes in a woman who had shown herself devoid of affection for her child and who had acted in entire opposition to these feelings.⁴⁴ Women of Western India were increasingly portrayed as a disgrace to the female sex. The judges reflected on the tremendous increase in such crimes and quoted four cases occurring in a single week. This was related to the leniency of the law rather than to better information-gathering techniques and they recommended to the government not to make any further reduction in the sentence, which ought to be fixed at the ultimate that the Penal Code could provide, i.e., death by hanging.

By contrasting Indian with Western female sexuality the coloniser delineated the nature of Indian womanhood as characterised by 'depraved sexuality'. Western women under similar restraints, according to the judges, diverted their energies to philanthropic tasks. The judges temporarily forgot that 61% of infant deaths under the age of one in nineteenth century Britain were attributed to disguised forms of infanticide.⁴⁵ The argument that Indian widows were victims of a peculiar situation was waved aside by asserting that women elsewhere in the world also laboured under similar constraints. Justices Pinhey and West declared in the case of Vijayalakshmi that:

⁴³Ibid., pp.239-40.

⁴⁴The judgement of West and Pinhey in the case of Vijayalakshmi is reported verbatim in Times of India, 27 May 1881; Extract taken from Ibid., p.241.

⁴⁵Lionel Rose, Massacre of the innocents: Infanticide in Great Britain, 1800-1939, (London, 1986), pp.5-14.

Was a woman who was prevented from marrying a second time to be distinguished from thousands and millions of women, who in civilized Europe, on account of the great preponderance of the female sex, were prevented from marrying?⁴⁶

Such women, they contended, should turn to religion and charitable works with resignation and fortitude. The judiciary had thus become an effective mechanism of social power. It warned the government that it was an inconsistent policy first of all to use great exertion to check female infanticide and then to tolerate infanticide - a crime which followed from indulgence in sexual passions against all notions of morality.

For the judiciary the fact that Vijayalakshmi and Dinbai were now widows was outweighed by the facts that they had previously enjoyed marital rights. Additionally, their desire to be mothers had found its natural gratification within marriage and that both of them had children from their husbands. Their subsequent violent actions were considered ample proof of the debased instincts of Indian women, accentuated by a superstitious, tradition-bound society. Henceforth, Indian female sexuality had to be controlled because of the dangers it posed to the lives of helpless infants.

In 1876 an unrefutable challenge was presented to indigenous reform circles with the publication of statistics on convictions for infanticide. Considerable opposition arose among Indians in the towns of Bombay, Poona, Ahmedabad and Solapur. An exemplary case of the Indian male opinion on the subject is provided by the treatise of Sir T. Madhava Rao, who, in his influential position as the Dewan of Baroda, pressed the government to review its law on infanticide. His views gained wide popularity through the vernacular and Anglo-Indian press, as seen in its frequent citation in the newspapers well into the 1890s. His treatise, 'Considerations of the Crime of Infanticide and its Punishment in India', appeared first in a London magazine, The Journal of the National Indian Association, in 1876.⁴⁷

Infanticide, he argued, was committed by young widows who were denied the rights of marital life by caste rules, and being youthful could not overcome their

⁴⁶(J.D), 1881, Vol.46, Comp.No.1036, p.242, (MSA).

⁴⁷Journal of the National Indian Association in Aid of Social Progress in India, No.65, May 1876, pp.131-37.

passions and instincts. This led to conception and delivery and ultimately the crime itself. The motive, as he understood it, was not a profit-seeking one like many other crimes, but the mother's respect for social opinion made her dread it so much that it overcame her natural affection for the child, leading her to sacrifice its life in order to escape censure. Thus, he argued, 'her respect for social opinion is much stronger(sic) than even her affection for her child'.⁴⁸

However, the motives as stated by the women themselves reveal greater anguish and stress than a mere respect for social opinion. Indeed, for most of them it appears to have been a question of survival. For a Brahmin widow, living in a large joint family, to raise an illegitimate child was impossible, an abhorrence to Hindu custom. It was a sign of unchastity, a sin intolerable in traditional society. Abortion and infanticide alone offered escape from such a situation. Whether they were considered serious crimes by pre-colonial Indian society is doubtful. Male offenders in infanticide cases were sometimes re-admitted into caste after a ritual purificatory ceremony accompanied by a small payment of money.⁴⁹ Adulterous wives were punished and under the Peshwas, Brahmin women were singled out for punishment for their 'unchaste' behaviour. But even then one finds that the punishment was a fine for an amount depending on the financial circumstances of the woman. Ghataspot (irrevocable excommunication from caste) was performed on Brahmin women who were made pregnant by low-caste men. Even in such cases, the worst punishment was to drive the offender out of town. One such instance is narrated by Savitribai Phule, who appeased the Mahar community of her village by bringing to Poona a girl who had an illegitimate child by a Brahmin priest in 1868.⁵⁰ However, there are no recorded instances of women aborting fetuses and infanticide being punished

⁴⁸Ibid., p.133.

⁴⁹The Arya Mahila Association reported one incident in Kolhapur when a man was re-admitted in his caste after a payment of twenty rupees. See its petition to Sir Bartle Frere, 11 Jun. 1883, n.p. (ICMM).

⁵⁰From M.G. Mali, Krantijyoti Savitribai Jotirao Phule (The revolutionary Savitribai Jotirao Phule), (Marathi), (Kolhapur, 1980), p.87.

severely.⁵¹ However, the best guide to contemporary notions on how crimes of infanticide were treated is the public response to the British penalties for it. The Vernacular press and men's petitions all reveal a tolerance of the act and advocated lenient penalties for it.

Economic reasons appear to have guided the Hindu joint family in its refusal to rear an illegitimate child, even when the child was born from a blood-tie within the family. First of all, if a Brahmin widow already had children from her marriage the question of rights of inheritance to property arose. Illegitimate children were known to contest for property.⁵² In a largely agricultural economy where large joint families depended on land for a living, this was seen as a serious economic hazard. In such cases, the joint family itself took the decision to kill the new-born infant, more often than not without the consent of the mother.⁵³ If the father happened to be a member of the extended kinship network, the family's social relations in the town or village were threatened through loss of self-esteem, ridicule and humiliation.

Loss of chastity by female members of the family also meant excommunication. In fear of this some male member of the household would kill the child; sometimes the woman was forced to kill it herself. A curious case is that of Asha Dwarka who killed his widowed sister-in-law, Bai Rupli, before she gave birth to a child from an illicit relationship with her husband's oldest brother. Bai Rupli had obtained permission from her caste panch (elders) to marry her husband's oldest brother after she discovered the pregnancy but the latter ran away from the village. This case is interesting because it shows the flexibility of Hindu laws as practised in the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ Begging and prostitution were two options for the mother

⁵¹See V.S. Kadam, 'The institution of marriage and position of women in eighteenth century Maharashtra', Indian Economic and Social History Review, 25:3, 1988, p.362.

⁵²Sudha Desai, Social life in Maharashtra under the Peshwas, (Bombay, 1980), p.88; See also Raymond West and Johann Georg Buhler (eds.), A Digest of Hindu Law, Book I, (Bombay, 1867), especially Introduction and Chapter Six.

⁵³The head of the household, usually the father-in-law and sometimes older relatives like great-uncles, took such decisions. See the proceedings in the case of Sangowa kom Gursidapa, (J.D), 1881, Vol.46, Comp.no.996, pp.115-31, (MSA); also the proceedings in the case of Thaku, (J.D), 1882, Vol.52, Comp.1525, pp.414-15, (MSA).

⁵⁴See the proceedings in this case in (J.D), 1880, Vol.50, Comp.No.917, (MSA).

if she chose to rear the child. However, these were impossible choices for wealthy Maratha and Brahmin widows who, having led a protected and sheltered life with minimal dealings with the public, were like orphans themselves when thrown out onto the streets. The only alternative was to choose between their own lives or that of the illegitimate child. The decision, if it happened to be hers, was thus always reduced to a question of survival.

Among the class of infanticidal women coming from the lower rungs of society, the most important motive was their ability to feed themselves and the child. There are many cases of infanticide reported during years of famine and plague. Sometimes a whole household disappeared in a plague-ridden town, leaving behind women who, reduced to stark poverty, were forced to make such mortifying decisions. And these decisions, as the petitions revealed, were usually made in a traumatic state of mind after having been debilitated through lack of food or sickness or both.⁵⁵ Many women who could not make such decisions took their own lives as well and one reads of reports of infanticide accompanied by suicide. The Bombay Samachar, reporting on the 'New Arrangements in regard to the Relief Works of the Current Famine', called attention to this problem in 1877:

Particularly women with one or more children cannot maintain themselves and their young ones. If the mothers try to feed their children, half-starving themselves, the children soon become orphans; if they neglect them, the latter fall victims to starvation.⁵⁶

Although women were at pains to explain the nature of their quest for survival in their petitions, their views and experiences were trivialised by men.

'Chastity' was the single issue on which all male groups agreed. But it was only female chastity that was under discussion. The woman had to be punished for her unchastity rather than for the crime of infanticide itself. To this end, male reformers urged the government to sentence the woman to rigorous imprisonment for a period

⁵⁵See the proceedings in the case of Mamti in (J.D), 1880, Vol.45, Comp.no.942, (MSA).

⁵⁶Reported on 10 Mar.1877, (NNR).

of time. Such a sentence was considered a just penalty for the loss of her virtue. An astute statesman and a skilful lawyer, Sir Madhava Rao argued that by awarding capital punishment nothing was gained. The woman in question had no time for remorse, and the other women to whom it was supposed to serve as an example were not affected, as they had no access to newspapers and did not witness public executions. Instead, he urged the government to keep her alive in jail. The fact that she was alive would make her the subject of conversation among female members of the public and eventually, when the culprit was released, she would still serve as an example to society as a whole.

The woman, according to Sir Madhava Rao, committed infanticide in order to hide her lack of chastity because the child was the only evidence of her immoral behaviour. Therefore she had to be punished. It was shame that drove her to the act of committing infanticide, therefore he recommended that one should:

...punish the woman by making her suffer that pain - that very pain which she most dreaded. Sentence her publicly, send her to gaol publicly, keep her there publicly, and let her suffer the pain of shame which she had dreaded so much. Would not that be a sufficiently deterring punishment?⁵⁷

There was no call for a stringent law to apprehend male participants in this crime. Nor did they organise social means of combating the problem by opening foundling homes or homes for widows, apart from Jyotirao Phule. The initiative was later taken by women reformers like Pandita Ramabai. What is striking here is that a life- and-death question to one sex appears to have been mere rhetoric to the other. Indian male reformers' concern over gender-based issues like infanticide extended to polemics alone.

The suggestions of Sir Madhava Rao were considered but not accepted by the government and there was no amendment of the law. After 1879, however, every case of infanticide which reached the High Court was referred to the local government for reconsideration on appeal. The supposed relief brought by this benevolent intervention

⁵⁷ 'Considerations of the crime of Infanticide', p.134.

of the state and the efforts of male reformers were not uniformly welcomed by the women themselves. That many never exercised the right of appeal reveals the extent of these disastrous interventions.

A disgruntled public found an opportunity to press the government on the issue of punitive measures for infanticidal women during the trial of Vijayalakshmi. The High Court's refusal to reduce the sentence of death in the Vijayalakshmi case produced a varied protest from Indians. It was characterised by several strands of arguments. First of all, there was no denial that the crime of infanticide occurred, but it was said that it was rare. Second, there was a unanimous affirmation of British observations on the nature of Indian female sexuality. That the Indian widow was lustful and that she alone committed the crime were inherent in these discussions, accompanied by an amazing silence on the role of the men behind the scenes.

The most widely circulated and publicised reaction of the Maharashtrian male was a public memorial by the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha submitted to the Governor-in-Council with its observations on the Vijayalakshmi case. The Sabha declared that:

...it had been moved to take action in this matter solely from the fact that Vijayalakshmi's case is a typical one, representative of a large number of similar cases, in which the present state of the law often conflicts with the national sense of justice.⁵⁸

This submission was characterised by a careful differentiation between infanticide committed by Brahmin widows and customary Hindu practices. The scriptures were quoted to show how infanticide was considered a terrible sin and a distinction was drawn between the Brahmin crime and the type of female infanticide practiced by Rajput tribes, whose origins were marked by a cold-blooded, pre-meditated murder of legitimate infants sanctioned by a customary right. Petitions by this association argued that in the case of Brahmins, infanticide was committed unintentionally on illegitimate children from a sense of overwhelming guilt and shame. And, therefore, to draw parallels between the two and to infer that infanticide was a general practice among

⁵⁸Petition from Sarvajanik Sabha, Poona, 5 Jun. 1881, (J.D), 1881, Vol.46, Comp.no.1036, (MSA).

Brahmins, and hence to say that it was necessary to make an example of it was totally unjustified.⁵⁹ Infanticide debates triggered a defensive posture among high-caste Hindus, trying to distinguish the Brahmin factor from the general Hindu tradition. Popular opinion as represented by the vernacular press and public associations such as the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha urged compassion on the grounds that the law did not have popular consent. In general, the discursive trend of the Hindu male public urged alternatives to widow remarriage in the form of amendment of the penalty for infanticide rather than devices designed to encourage widow remarriage. In fact, both Sir Madhava Rao and the public memorial of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha stressed that, until 'nationalist feelings' on widow remarriage changed, no action could be taken in this direction. The plea from Hindu men was for the status quo to continue.

In spite of assertions that the scriptures called for a severe punishment for widows committing such offences, popular Hindu opinion revealed a greater tolerance of the crime. Even though Hindu religion and morality stressed the greatest restraint on the conduct of widows whenever there was a lapse, customary practice had established a norm whereby as long as the widow concealed the fact of her unchastity, she continued to be tolerated by society. There are several instances under Peshwa rule where cases of extra-marital relations leading to pregnancy and abortion were dealt with by the gota and a fine was levied on rich high-caste widows and lower-caste females were turned into slaves depending on the requirement of the state.⁶⁰ Following this tradition seemed to be the most pragmatic solution to Hindu opinion on the subject. The attitude of the residents of Solapur towards penalties for such conduct is revealed in their petition:

The Criminal Law of the Country so far as it affects the crime of Infanticide by Hindu widows is opposed to the national sense of justice and the prevalent Public opinion is unanimous that so long as widow marriage is forbidden by the caste rules amongst Hindus, it is positively cruel to visit such occasional lapses from moral

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 221.

⁶⁰V.S. Kadam, 'The institution of marriage', Indian Economic Social and History Review, pp. 361-63.

rectitude as that by Vijayalakshmi with severe penalty.⁶¹

Widow remarriage had become a contentious point in the discussion of infanticide for Indian elites. Hindu male opinion did not centre on the promotion of widow remarriage or upon enacting new laws to prosecute the offending parties involved in every infanticide case. Instead, their rhetoric hinged on the amendment of legislation governing the penalty for women convicted of this charge, so that it would be more in line with the 'national feeling' on the subject.

Chastity, interpreted as a virtue, had become an acrimonious part of the tensions between the dominant groups over the infanticide debates. There was no doubt in the minds of colonial administrators regarding the uncontrolled sensuality of Indian women. In 1847, a rare departure from transporting infanticidal women took place in the case of Goorningowa, a widow from Kaladgi, when Mr. Tagore, the Sessions Judge who presided over her case sent it to the government for recommendation for mercy. While granting mercy, Mr. Gibbs, a member of the Governor's Council, declared that:

In England, even cases of this kind are leniently dealt with - I have always felt great pity for uneducated Hindu widows whose law is supposed to prevent their remarriage, and whose religion as they understood[sic] it, places a very slight moral restraint on their actions.⁶²

He awarded a sentence of seven years' rigorous imprisonment to the widow in question. In the Vijayalakshmi case, the judges questioned the moral standards of Dinbai and Vijayalakshmi who, according to them, had enjoyed marital rights, borne children, and yet continued to indulge their passions.

Such arguments were seen as a slur on the Hindu religion and those who were defending its high standards of morality. But Hindu reformers found themselves in a

⁶¹Daji Dhalchand Gujar, et.al., to the Chief Secretary to Government, 25 Jul. 1881, (J.D), 1881, Vol.46, Comp.no.1036, (MSA).

⁶²Cited in the resolution of the Governor-in-Council in regard to the Vijayalakshmi case, in (J.D), 1881, Vol.46, Comp.no.1036, (MSA).

peculiar position. Their acknowledgement of the crime of infanticide led them to affirm the unchastity of the Hindu widow. Their efforts to persuade the government to amend the law in order to reduce the punishment on the grounds that the widow was motivated through a sense of utter shame, was tantamount to acceptance of the unchastity of Indian women. Forced into a defensive posture, they tried to avoid contradictions in their arguments by blaming Hindu widows and putting responsibility for the crime on them alone.

They argued that Hindu widows had to be distinguished from women of the West because of the differences in education, and in mental, moral and social training. According to them, women's ignorance of the Shastric injunctions against this crime led them to think that immorality was generally regarded as such only when it became a public scandal and insisted that Indian women's illiteracy led them to think that 'being found out was the essence of wrong doing'.⁶³ An attempt was made to prove the high regard in which Hindu women's chastity was held by the Shastras, so much so that the tremendous restraints forced the woman to hide all proof of her unchastity from society. Thus, they argued, Hindu widows committed such acts from their appalling state of ignorance of the true Hindu religion and morality.⁶⁴

Indian widows were projected as suffering from a nervous disposition which was a creation of the debates on female sexuality. It was argued that widows committed such violent acts in a temporary state of insanity.⁶⁵ It was also claimed that natural maternal instincts were clouded after the birth of a child 'when the mother's mind must have been in a more or less demented condition'.⁶⁶ It was pointed out that infanticidal women required medical attention.

That the body of the Hindu widow belonged not only to the Indian male but to the caste in which she was born is highlighted by contemporary debates. In 1881, sixteen widows belonging to the non-Brahmin castes such as Kunbis, Mahars,

⁶³Times of India, 27 May 1881, extract from ibid.

⁶⁴Subodh Patrika, 4 Jun. 1881, (NNR).

⁶⁵Petition of Poona Sarvajanic Sabha, 5 Jun. 1881, (J.D).

⁶⁶Times of India, 27 May 1881, ibid.

Lingayats, and Baniyas were convicted of infanticide and sentenced to transportation for life. In all cases, their trials received no publicity from the vernacular press or from leading reformers. The penal law and its iniquities suddenly gained attention among indigenous reform circles with the case of Dinbai, a Parsi widow belonging to a 'respectable family' of Bombay. The Parsi press widely publicised her case and carried on its agitation relentlessly until her sentence was reduced from capital punishment to three years' simple imprisonment.⁶⁷

In a strikingly similar manner, influential Brahmins from Poona, Bombay, Kolhapur and Solapur took up cudgels for a Brahmin widow. They woke up to the fact that high caste widows were being treated indiscriminately by British courts as exemplified by the case of Vijayalakshmi. The memorial of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, petitions by the residents of Solapur and Bombay, the treatise of Sir Madhava Rao, uniformly reflect a preoccupation with caste affinity.

The bias in favour of the Brahmin widow was so great that it influenced the courts' decisions in cases after 1881. The judges adopted a standard norm of commuting sentences of transportation for life to a period of imprisonment in the case of Brahmin widows on the ground that remarriage was forbidden to them or that they laboured under 'peculiar circumstances' which governed their conduct within the Brahmanic tradition.⁶⁸

Such preferential treatment towards Brahmin widows had a negative effect on the treatment of low-caste widows by the courts. Differentiation was marked in cases like that of Kondi Kom Shivappa, a Mahar widow aged thirty, who was not granted remission of sentence from transportation for life to one of five years' rigorous imprisonment because Justice West thought that '... the prisoner has not the excuse of palliation that might be urged in her favour as were a Brahmin widow'.⁶⁹ Gender issues were thus intimately linked to caste in reform debate and this bias continued in the decisions of the courts right up to the end of the nineteenth century.

⁶⁷Jame Jamshed, 16 Dec.1876, (NNR).

⁶⁸See the proceedings in the case of Banabai Kom Bhiwraj, (J.D), 1890, Vol.107.A, Comp.No.138, (MSA).

⁶⁹Ibid.

Infanticide and the Law

It is important to mention here changes in penal measures which reflect tensions between the judiciary and the executive. In 1881 the judges who had decided the Vijayalakshmi case made a departure from the policy of recommending cases to the government for mercy. Four other similar cases were reported in the same week as Vijayalakshmi and this recorded increase in the crime of child murder was seen to be the result of the leniency of the government. Justice Pinhey noted the reasons for the change in the policy in the case of Sangowa Kom Gursidapa:

Transportation for life is the best possible fate these unfortunate women can experience. They are defiled and outcasted for life by their incontinence and their subsequent crime. Under no circumstances and after no lapse of time can they be received back into their families on terms of equality. If they are transported and behave well they will in time earn qualified freedom and eventually amongst a new people and in a new country be able to form new domestic ties.⁷⁰

Besides, he ended optimistically, the obnoxious customs of Hindu India would be absent in the Andamans. Naturally the motivation for infanticide would be removed and this would serve as a guarantee that she would not commit the crime again.⁷¹

However, the disciplinary function appropriated by the judiciary proved to be unacceptable to the government. Tremendous pressure was applied by Indian elites and finally the Governor compromised. He stated that the judges appeared to have dealt with the Vijayalakshmi case more from an abstract point of view rather than with any real appreciation of the actual circumstances of a Hindu widow. Vijayalakshmi's sentence was then reduced to five years' rigorous imprisonment.⁷² The politicisation of the Vijayalakshmi case was clearly seen in the orders of the government that from 1881 onwards, no statement of reasons was to accompany remission of sentences on infanticidal women and that no answer was given to the public memorial of the Poona

⁷⁰(J.D), 1881, Vol.46, Comp.No.996, (MSA).

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²(J.D), 1881, Vol.46, Comp.No.1036, (MSA).

Sarvajanik Sabha.⁷³

The question of 'choice' rose again in 1884 over the case of Baya, a seventeen year old girl convicted of infanticide. Sir James Fergusson, Governor of Bombay Presidency, brought up the question of transportation of teenage convicts to the Andamans. Like the judges, in the case he felt that it was more merciful to transfer infanticidal women to penal colonies.⁷⁴ Such benevolent feelings on the part of the Governor were actually matters of urgent concern to the state. Prison arrangements were in jeopardy due to the dwindling numbers of female convicts. The Superintendent of Prisons at Port Blair voiced this practical concern in a letter to the Home Department:

...the number of convicts in the female jail at Port Blair is rapidly decreasing, and if a larger number of females are not transported than has been done during the past three years, it will be impossible to carry out the system of permitting male convicts to marry, and to carry on the weaving manufactory which is productive of large savings to Government...⁷⁵

The Government of India, however, refused to modify the rule which barred female convicts serving short-term sentences from being transported to the isles. Despite this, the Governor of Bombay found a way out by simply increasing the sentences of transportation to seven and ten years' and posing it as a choice to be given to women convicted of infanticide.

After June 1884 a woman convicted of infanticide was lured towards the penal colonies with the promise that:

...she will be made to work for a few years, and then probably be allowed to marry a ticket-of-leave convict, [sic] and be exempted from further punishment, though she

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴(J.D), 1884, Vol.41, Comp.No.229, (MSA).

⁷⁵Letter from Col. T.Cadell, Superintendent of Jails, Port Blair and Nicobars, to Secretary, to the Government of India, Home Dept., 23 Nov. 1886, (J.D), 1886, Vol.37, Comp.No.1456, (MSA).

will be obliged to remain in the Andamans.⁷⁶

The authorities thus combined benevolence with cunning and further made use of the Indian female body in the service of the colonial state. One might as a result have expected shiploads of Indian women to be transported, but this did not happen. A case of bigamy took place in the Andamans and was reported in the newspapers; consequently the incentive of marriage was removed from the choice offered to female offenders. Quite a few of the women convicted of infanticide were abandoned wives and so a second marriage was beyond their reach. Besides, not a single female convict between 1884 and 1890 opted to go to the Andamans, in spite of all the incentives offered to them. Many of the women simply stated that they had no wish to remarry and many more said that they had children from their first marriages whom they could no longer see if they went to the penal settlements.⁷⁷ In (180) this system of offering choice was discontinued and the government reverted to reducing sentences to a term of rigorous imprisonment. X

Certain gender-based inequalities were built into the laws governing punishment. For example, infanticide was defined as the 'case of a woman killing her illegitimate child directly after birth'. The assumption that the mother was always the murderer was inherent in the law itself. Male offenders were charged only in the role of an abettor under Section 303 relating to the secret disposal of the body. The mother, on the other hand, was held solely responsible for the crime. She was charged separately under 3 sections: Section 301 - for culpable homicide amounting to murder; Section 302 - for exposure and/or abandonment of the child; and Section 303 - for secret disposal of the body.

Even though Section 302 uses the term 'parent' signifying either father or mother, in very few cases do we hear of the father of the child being charged on this account. In 1883, when a problem arose over the disposal of a body by a third party

⁷⁶From 'Modification of the order of the Government of India in sending women convicted of infanticide and sentenced to transportation for seven years or more to the colonies', in (J.D), 1884, Vol.41, Comp.No.229, (MSA).

⁷⁷See the statement by Gangu Kom Tukaram, (J.D), 1884, Vol.68, Comp.No.765, (MSA); also the statement by Huseinbi Kom Imam Saheb, (J.D), 1885, Vol.53, Comp.No.601, (MSA).

with or without the tacit consent of the mother, the court ruled that the mother was to be held responsible in all such cases.⁷⁸ The essential principle governing the law appears to have been that the mother alone had a motive in committing child murder. There was no enactment whereby the father of the child would have had a motive in assisting or committing the deed himself in a manner to escape detention. Consequently even the system of detection was prejudiced against the mother. While village police officials were trained to keep a close check on the movements of pregnant women and on women who had recently delivered, their menfolk escaped detection. This bias marks agreement on the matter between the judiciary and the executive authorities.

Contrary to these assumptions, women's petitions show that it was not always the mother who committed the crime. Women implicated fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, their lovers, village Patils and even step-sons. It was quite possible that if the woman could get witnesses, she could successfully reveal the true criminal. This is what happened in the case of Tukki Kom Siddappa, a prostitute, who implicated the village headman although the latter was shielded by the village sepoy and the head constable. However, the midwife and her assistant who attended Tukki's delivery gave evidence regarding the headman's role and Tukki's sentence was reduced from transportation to five years' R.I.⁷⁹

The framework of the Penal Code forced the mother onto the defensive, which meant that if she implicated someone else she had to provide the evidence for it. This clause prevented women from implicating male offenders, as it was very unlikely that a woman who had recently delivered a child would have had the opportunity to observe anything happening around her. The best proof of this is the fact that except for one case of a stepson transported for life, there were only five cases of men being arrested for abetment of the crime in sixteen years in the Bombay Presidency. Even here, all five were acquitted and discharged on grounds of insufficient evidence.

Section 109 of the Indian Penal Code presented peculiar problems of

⁷⁸From 'Want of provision in the law for punishing such crimes as the prevention of the crime of exposing and abandoning infants', in (J.D), 1883, Vol.56, Comp.No.720, (MSA).

⁷⁹(J.D), 1882, Vol.44, Comp.No.950, (MSA).

interpretation to the judiciary in the Bombay Presidency and proved to be a tortuous travail for the women, the victims of this interpretation. The law governing infanticide made no provision for married women, especially savatis (second wives), who killed legitimate children. This lack of distinction led to further confusion about its inability to distinguish infanticide from suicide.

In times of desperation housewives seem to have resorted to throwing themselves and their children into rivers, tanks and wells. Violence towards women by menfolk, especially by the husband, neglect and ill-treatment were the main motives behind such desperate acts of suicide and infanticide. A typical case is that of Basawa Kom Basapa, whose petition is worth quoting at length, as it was a tale told many times over in the courts:

I lived happily with my husband Basapa until he married Chanawa by Pat ceremony. Chanawa always quarrelled with me on some pretext or other. My husband also behaved with me in the same way and further treated me very cruelly. Two years ago he struck me with a garden scythe, the marks of which are still visible on my body. He moreover turned me out of his house. I returned home again but they went to live in a neighbouring house and kept me starving. Having lived in this way for fifteen days I went to my husband and requested him to make some arrangement for my maintenance. He and my co-wife, however, began to beat me and drove me out of the house. They struck me with an iron ladle and the mark left by it is still visible on my chest. I could not live any longer without food and being disgusted with my existence in this world my head turned and I could not see what to do... Being unable to bear it any longer, I took my child and went to a well and threw myself into it with the child, not knowing the consequences of what I was going to do.⁸⁰

When a co-wife was involved, women were often driven to commit infanticide along with suicide, as they were convinced that their children would not get a fair chance.⁸¹ Such cases were dealt with by the Governor-in- Council under the category of

⁸⁰(J.D), 1890, Vol.70, Comp.No.279, (MSA).

⁸¹See proceedings in the case of Sakrowa Kom Bhimapa, (J.D), 1882, Vol.52, Comp.No.1069, (MSA).

'derangement of senses' compounded by ill-treatment. Sentences were commuted from transportation for life to ten or seven years' hard labour but never less than five years. The lack of distinction between the various kinds of situations giving rise to this offence led to the harsh treatment of infanticidal and suicidal women within the realm of criminal justice.

Women who conceived as a result of rape and committed the offence of infanticide did not come under any category of mitigating circumstances. Petitions reveal that Indian women, especially widows, were vulnerable to this form of violence against them. Cases of widows being raped by a member of a vast network of relations within the joint family were reported. In some instances the kinship tie was as close as a father-in-law or brother-in-law. For example, in the case of Sangowa, widow of Gursidapa of Kaladgi, who was raped by one of the joint family members of her husband's family, her father-in-law forced her to commit infanticide under threat of throwing her out of the house. He was convicted merely of burying the body of the child and sentenced to three months; Sangowa was transported for seven years.⁸²

Without the symbolic and real protection of the husband, lower-class widows were as vulnerable as widows of higher castes. Rakhuma, a day labourer, confessed that she had been waylaid, while working in a paddy field, by a man belonging to her caste a few months after the death of her husband, and that she had borne a child of this 'forcible intercourse'. She also stated that, as a result she had not aborted the child because of the danger to her own life and especially because she had one surviving child whom she loved by her deceased husband and wanted to take care of as the child had no one aside from her. The death of her child borne of rape, she insisted, had been due to malarial fever.⁸³

Petitions reveal the extremely pitiful dilemmas of widows who had been raped by very close members of the husband's family, such as a brother-in-law. The notion of pollution attached to widows was compounded if they were found to have conceived due to rape. Unwilling to bring on the wrath of the family by naming the

⁸²(J.D), 1881, Vol.46, Comp.No.998, (MSA).

⁸³(J.D), 1885, Vol.33, Comp.No.1282, (MSA).

person involved, the widow usually murdered the newly born infant in the hope that by the disappearance of the only proof of the rape, she would be retained in the family.

In 1885 Rakhuma Kom Bala was transported for ten years, in spite of her plea that she had been forced to commit the crime under the pressure brought by her husband's family. She had been raped by her brother-in-law after the death of her husband, but her father-in-law had told her that the reputation of the family would be in jeopardy if the town came to know of the rape and therefore she was cajoled into committing the act. The Governor, sentencing her to ten years' transportation, minuted:

...the case is a bad one of its kind - for the woman's only excuse for killing the child was that she was afraid of being turned out of caste.⁸⁴

The legal interpretations did not consider the circumstances of Rakhuma's conception or the instigators behind the act but only her role in the commission of the act.

As we have seen in colonial discourse the Indian widow was identified with sensuality. She was described as a person who gave vent to 'backward instincts' with no control over her passions. It was important to control this sexuality as it represented a danger to human life. Indian views on female sexuality highlighted the 'temporary insanity' of infanticidal women and inadvertently drew the attention of the state to it. This gave ample space for the intervention of medico-judicial mechanisms via the state in order to manage the biological perversions of mothers beset with murderous obsessions. This trend is seen from the 1880s when the state took upon itself the task of keeping a close watch over all suicides and infanticides following parturition and devised a rational technology to rectify it. In the 1880s lunatic asylums in Bombay Presidency were admitting women convicted of attempted suicide, infanticide or both. In 1890, the Directors of the asylums in Colaba, North Kanara and Nasik complained that they had no more space to accommodate female convicts and brought the attention of the state to the need to build new asylums for this purpose.⁸⁵

⁸⁴(J.D), 1885, Vol.53, Comp.No.601, (MSA).

⁸⁵(J.D), 1885, Vol.60, Comp.No.322, (MSA).

The combination of medical measures and judicial powers created a construction of the female psyche in terms of a hysterical condition. The deranged woman throwing herself and her child down a well or the ill-treated wife exposing her child in a field, was invariably examined for hereditary epilepsy. The fever-racked under-nourished Kunbi cultivator who committed infanticide was supposed to have done this deed in a state of ungovernable passion and unsoundness of mind. Women committing infanticide supposedly due to post-puerperal mania filled the lunatic asylums of the Bombay Presidency.

The assumptions of the corrective role of the state by its provision of lunatic hospitals for women brought unprecedented problems, especially in the case of women convicted of infanticide committed during post-puerperal mania. The interventionist nature of the judiciary was not always appreciated by the families to which these women belonged. Post-puerperal mania was in most cases a temporary condition and such women were set free once they were declared to be of 'sound mind' but not many families accepted them back into their homes. Tulsa Kom Lakshman, who was released three months after her conviction, was refused entry by her husband.⁸⁶

There are many cases of infanticidal women being examined for epileptic fits who were confined in such asylums and faced problems similar to those of Tulsa after their release.⁸⁷ These refusals were not merely due to the woman having been in an asylum but also to the security demanded by the government under Section 475 of the Criminal Procedure Code which was an unwelcome responsibility for the family.⁸⁸

The law did not take into consideration the material circumstances of women arrested for infanticide. We have seen earlier how Indian elites fought the case for Brahmin widows. In the case of Kunbis, Mahars, or Mangs convicted for this act the chances of escaping transportation were slim, and they had to fight very hard for a remission in their sentences. Kesar, a widow and a victim of a famine-stricken area, was convicted of the murder of her child, aged eighteen months. She pleaded that she had been reduced to great distress through her husband's death. She had to maintain

⁸⁶Proceedings in the case of Tulsa Kom Lakshman, (BJP), 1885, Vol.P/2651, No.618, (IOL).

⁸⁷(J.D), 1882, Vol.98, Comp.No.1181, (MSA).

⁸⁸Ibid.

her mother-in-law as well as the child and herself and could earn little or nothing by her labour. Her husband's relatives could give her little or no assistance as they themselves were in no better circumstances. She stated that she committed the act under great provocation and in order to relieve the distress, she felt at her inability to feed the child and to relieve its suffering. Her petition was rejected on the grounds that:

... it is usual to commute a sentence for a widow who had killed her child in the agony and excitement of childbirth but not for a widow who kills her legitimate child one and a half years after its birth. Her only excuse offered is poverty. Dangerous to commute as lower classes are tempted to free themselves from responsibility.⁸⁹

Many of the infanticide cases were fraught with ambiguity and the courts dealt arbitrarily with them. There were no legal guidelines by which to account for natural infant mortality caused by sickness and the undernourishment of the mother and child. For example, Durgi a twenty-year-old Mang offender pleaded, 'Not Guilty'. In her petition she stated that:

I took care of the child for three months, supporting myself all the while by begging. Then I became ill with fever and the child also became ill, suffering from itches which produced large blotches on its body. There was no person belonging to my caste in my village where I was living and I used to support myself and the child by begging. When I became ill, we suffered much for want of food and shelter and the child being very young and ill died as a consequence.⁹⁰

However, the High Court did not believe her in spite of the post-mortem report which showed no signs of violence against the child. The fact that her child was born out of wedlock was enough proof for the judge to conclude that she had killed it out of shame. Durgi was a Mang who had no such constraints placed on her by her caste and

⁸⁹(J.D), 1887, Vol.76, Comp.No.298, (MSA).

⁹⁰(J.D), 1880, Vol.100, Comp.No.23, (MSA).

kin. The law of infanticide was however governed so strictly by ideas of 'licit' and 'illicit' intercourse and 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' children that there were inevitably distortions in the court's judgements.

Another circumstance that the judge did not take into consideration was that of women who underwent a natural miscarriage or gave birth to stillborn infants when affected by malarial fever. There are many cases of women pleading innocence of the act on the grounds of having suffered from debilitating sicknesses and fevers which caused miscarriages or stillbirths. However, in most cases such appeals were rejected on the grounds that 'there ought to be contrition on confession as a basis for an appeal to the clemency of Government', and not a justification for the act. The whole Penal Code rested on 'confession' rather than on giving the accused an opportunity to prove her innocence. It is not surprising, therefore, when we come across two or more petitions which follow the strange format of a plea of 'Not Guilty' in the first trial, sometimes 'Not Guilty' in the second, and finally in the third petition a plea for clemency by confessing to a crime which may or may not have been committed. When judges pointed out the contradictions in such appeals, an amazing number of women revealed simply that they were advised by jailors, relatives or friends and others that until they pleaded guilty they would not be granted a remission of sentence.⁹¹

There are instances of aggressive assertion by women which reveal solidarity based on a rudimentary consciousness of gender among women probably brought about by a traumatising crisis. Judith Tucker has noted a similar trend among nineteenth century Egyptian women which she refers to as acts of resistance within the home.⁹² In certain cases elderly women like mothers, were arrested on charges of administering medicines to daughters with a view to causing a miscarriage.⁹³ Such

⁹¹See the proceedings in the case of Rakhmin of Ratnagiri, (J.D), 1887, Vol.76, Comp.No.298, (MSA).

⁹²Judith Tucker, Women in nineteenth century Egypt, (Cambridge, 1985), p.135.

⁹³See the proceedings in the case of Saipi kome Sonda, sentenced to ten years' rigorous imprisonment for procuring medicines in order to cause abortion, (J.D), 1882, Vol.60, Comp.No.865, (MSA); see also the case of Bhima who inserted a 'medicated twig in the private parts of Ganga', in order to help the latter to abort, (J.D), 1885, Vol.99, Comp.No.532, (MSA).

pre-meditated acts by women were usually carried out to protect the daughter from the wrath of the family or caste. At times elderly women risked their lives and the motive was probably to avoid humiliation and ex-communication by the caste and village panchayat if the family member had conceived as a result of coercion by a close relation.

Two vital support systems for a woman were her natal home when unmarried and, after marriage, the family of her husband. Withdrawal of the protection of these support systems meant a catastrophe for the woman, economically and psychologically. Section 303 of the Indian Penal Code gave one definition of infanticide as - 'Exposure of child by parent with intention of wholly abandoning it'. However, in all cases of abandonment of newly born infants or of children by mothers, the mothers had also themselves been abandoned.

Infanticidal women had case histories of abandonment by parents, brothers or sisters, or by husbands, and widows by lovers and relatives. Unmarried girls between the ages of sixteen and nineteen are also reported to have committed infanticide out of fear of abandonment by their parents or brothers or sisters. Petawwa, an eighteen-year-old girl, delivered a child out of wedlock at her sister's house and admitted that she had killed the child from fear of her mother and brother, with whom she normally lived, because they would beat her to death if they found out about her pregnancy and also because she was afraid of 'the dishonour to herself if the matter became known to the public'.⁹⁴

Age was not taken into account in sentences passed on infanticidal women. The law treated young girls arrested for infanticide on a par with older women convicted of the same act. Yenki Kom Phakira, a seventeen-year-old girl, was sentenced to be hanged by the Sessions Judge of Belgaum under Sections 109 and 302. On appeal, the sentence was reduced by the government to transportation for life with the convict being sent to the Andamans on her attaining eighteen years of age.⁹⁵

Protests against such harsh judgements were sometimes lodged by local residents. In a petition from the inhabitants of Ahmednagar against Judge

⁹⁴(J.D), 1887, Vol.76, Comp.No.298, (MSA).

⁹⁵(J.D), 1883, Vol.87, Comp.No.707, (MSA).

Wedderburn's conviction of a fourteen-year-old girl, Ameerabee, and the consequent sentence of transportation for life, they argued that the sentence was a very severe one and that:

...the object of the Legislative(sic) in punishing such offenders is to give a warning to persons in the position of the person sentenced against committing like offences. This punishment will not serve as a lesson to children of eight or nine years old...⁹⁶

In spite of public protest, the girl was sentenced to be sent to the penal colony. There is no evidence to show whether such juvenile offenders were sent to reformatory homes as was the case with male children. On the contrary, the sentence of transportation for ten years or more in effect meant a lifetime in the Andamans, which showed that no departures were made for juvenile female offenders.

Desertion of wives seems to have been a common practice at least among the lower castes in Maharashtra and sometimes among the Marathas. It resulted usually as a consequence of a new marriage or favours shown to mistresses and rarely due to economic reasons such as droughts or famines. Desertion of wives by husbands or of widows by their lovers was also accompanied by factors such as abandonment by family, ill-treatment and violence towards women by kith and kin, acute poverty and failure to secure gainful employment. Gunga, a twenty-year-old Mahar, stated in her petition that:

I was a widow but was kept by Dirya Mahar in his house, who had promised to marry me. I had intercourse with him and was big with child. Subsequently he turned me out of his house. I told him that I had the child by him and asked him where I was to go.

Eventually she was forced to seek shelter in her sister's house, where she was made to feel unwelcome since she had borne an illegitimate child which was referred to as

⁹⁶(J.D), 1880, Vol.146, Comp.No.104, (MSA).

a 'scandal'.⁹⁷

A crucial test for the survival of the infant was the ability of the deserted wife or abandoned widow to find employment. For lower caste women who could find employment in the construction industry, employers often discriminated against mothers with suckling infants and pregnant women. Many cases of such discrimination are reported in the criminal records by female petitioners as well as in newspaper reports. It is therefore not surprising that women who threw their children into wells or tanks and sometimes committed suicide along with infanticide did it not immediately after the birth of their infants but after a fortnight, a month, or a year or two, depending on when they reached their nadir.

Chandra Kom Kundoo stated that she had been abandoned by her second husband, then dismissed by her employer on account of her pregnant condition, then turned out of the house of her sister by her husband with whom she had sought refuge.⁹⁸ In Gungi Kom Krishna's case, the child died due to neglect, as her mother-in-law and brother-in-law sent her back to the relief works the fifth day after her delivery. Ill and undernourished, she told the Court she did not have enough milk to suckle the child.⁹⁹ There are instances of deserted women who, in spite of their poverty, illness and unemployment, would have been willing to look after their children if their natal home had offered some support.¹⁰⁰

Finally, it is evident that women alone understood the crucial links between infanticide and survival of the mother concerned. The consciousness of being and belonging to the female group and hence more vulnerable was present in a greater degree among women. They also probably rallied around each other through a shared sense of a subordinate status and experience as is evidenced in many cases of infanticide that came into the colonial courts. Very often, midwives, grandmothers, aunts, friendly neighbours' wives or female friends rallied around the woman who was

⁹⁷(J.D), 1887, Vol.40, Comp.No.1179, (MSA).

⁹⁸(J.D), 1882, Vol.52, Comp.No.1419, (MSA).

⁹⁹(J.D), 1890, Vol.107.B, Comp.No.138, (MSA).

¹⁰⁰For example, in the case of Baya who stated that she would not have abandoned her child if her mother had given her shelter, in (J.D), 1881, Vol.47, Comp.No.1301, (MSA).

in the predicament of delivering an illegitimate child.

The collective consciousness of women over their survival question is clearly seen in the number of elderly women including grandmothers who were arrested on charges of murder, or abetment of murder, or of disposal of the body of the child. The grandmother, perhaps an elderly lady of fifty or sixty years, was usually an ally of the daughter who faced the dilemma. However, the law provided no compassion for grandmothers convicted of infanticide.¹⁰¹ Scholarly works on infanticide often cite status as a determining factor in the commission of the act.¹⁰² A great number of the Brahmin widows quoted status as an important motive though only one among a range of motives for the act. Some women like Vijayalakshmi admitted that being a Brahmin had become an obstacle in finding employment elsewhere.¹⁰³ Employment was open to Brahmin widows only in the houses of Brahmins and only in the capacity of menial outhouse work which would not violate pollution notions. It was a formidable choice for a Brahmin widow who had led a sheltered life, and it would have meant a great lowering in the standard of living. More significantly, it meant a precarious existence.

Material conditions were crucial factors ultimately because even those who said it was fear of social opinion, knew that if their unchastity was made public they would be denied the shelter of the home whether natal or marital and invite the wrath of the caste or village. Status was thus correlated with the economic prospects for a widow.

In the case of lower caste women, desertion and poverty, abandonment by the husband, with sickness and impoverishment or famine and unemployment, or a combination of several factors led them to make painful decisions such as infanticide, sometimes combined with suicide. Finally, both the Brahmin and lower-caste widows had only sexual value to their lovers. Once it turned into reproductive value, women

¹⁰¹For instance, Madivalowa's appeal was rejected by the Governor who stated that, 'Only mothers killing infants directly after birth are considered by the government'; (J.D), 1890, Vol.104, Comp.No.238, (MSA).

¹⁰²For a study of notions of 'shame' and 'honour' as determinants in the act of infanticide in rural Mediterranean society see Stephen Wilson, 'Infanticide, child abandonment, and female honour in nineteenth-century Corsica', Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol.30, 1988, pp.762-83.

¹⁰³Vijayalakshmi's petition, 21 Jun. 1881, (J.D), 1881, Vol.47, Comp.No.726, (MSA).

of both classes were rejected and denied any form of shelter or privileges. The class of infanticidal women in the nineteenth century clearly demonstrates how a woman, whether elite (Brahmin) or subordinate (Mang) in caste were undeniably the lowest in the gender hierarchy.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed how notions of crime and criminality attributed by the state to certain women's acts and types of behaviour resulted in a deterioration in the material condition as well as in the social status of women. It is suggested here that acts of violence by women against husbands (in husband-poisoning incidents) were a form of resistance to social prohibitions on divorce, compounded by the colonial state's intervention in tightening these restrictions. Moreover, violence used by women against men also arose as a defence against cruelty practised by the latter against the former. Attempts to abort foetuses and infanticide have been studied as protests against restrictions on re-marriage and for survival in a society with dual standards of morality for men and women.

For the emerging women's movement the identification of the woman as the offender in the law governing infanticide posed a matter of deep concern leading them to protest and act to remedy the situation. The penal laws governing the offences of poisoning of husbands, abortion and infanticide had a strong bias against the female which ultimately served to raise the consciousness of women, as seen in the activities of women's organisations.

What this chapter has demonstrated is that despite women's subordinate condition, the determination of the state and Indian men to control them, women did not passively accept the situation. On the contrary, what we see is women's resistance, with varying degrees of success according to the scope of action available for them.

The study of what was perceived by the state as crime has shown the highly interventionist nature of the colonial regime in these matters. Through the study of infanticide it is shown how the judiciary worked alongside the executive authority and the penitentiary to act as instruments of control over 'unruly' subjects, legitimising its rule as one tempered by justice (through the prerogative of mercy). A complex function determined the state's action when it listened to indigenous elites in the

discussion over punitive measures governing infanticidal women. By inviting influential Indian reformers to debate notions of women's chastity and morality it appealed the indigenous masses and, by strengthening the patriarchal values as embedded in the codes governing what came to be identified as female crimes, it won the assent of the indigenous male population. x

CHAPTER V

THE MOVEMENT FOR THE HIGHER EDUCATION OF WOMEN

Higher education for women in the late nineteenth century was firmly advocated by leading male social reformers in Maharashtra. In rhetoric, they constantly blamed the 'prejudices' of traditional Hindu society as being primarily responsible for the slow progress of female education. However, the main reasons for the neglect of higher education for women lay elsewhere. Education of women above primary level was very closely linked to the prevailing patriarchal ideology of Indian society and until the colonial government altered the rules and regulations governing the educational system in the case of women, the movement was to see no progress.

The attempts of the Maharashtrian male intelligentsia to 'guide' and control the movement for the higher education of women is examined here. The processes through which Indian men ensured the maintenance of separate spheres is analysed here. In the first section the growth of educational institutions for women is outlined, showing how male reformers gained a great degree of control over them. In the second half, a study of the colonial state's attempts to manipulate the medical education of women in order to maintain the interests of the imperial female is undertaken, demonstrating how the movement for the higher education of Indian women was entangled with racial as well as gender discrimination.

The education of girls: 1820-80

Formal schooling for girls in the Bombay Presidency was begun by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In 1824 it started a school in Bombay and by 1826 it had nine schools with an average attendance of 340 pupils.¹ Together with the Church Missionary Society and Scottish Missionary Society considerable progress was made in the next ten years when girls' schools were opened not only in Bombay but also in towns such as Nasik, Ahmednagar, Thana, and Bassein.²

¹Amina Bose, 'American Missionaries' Involvement in Higher Education in India in the Nineteenth Century,' Ph.D. thesis, 1971, University of Kansas, p.275; and J.P.Naik (ed.), A Review of Education in Bombay State 1855-1955, (Bombay, 1958), p.387.

²J.P.Naik (ed.), ibid., p.387.

A quarter of a century passed before indigenous groups showed an interest in the movement. A shrewd collaboration between the leading members of the Bombay intelligentsia and the influential and affluent shetias (mercantile community) saw the opening of the first schools for girls in 1849 under the aegis of the Students' Literary and Scientific Society.³ Caste and communal interests surfaced and the Society split in 1851 into the Gujarati Dnyan Prasarak Mandali, chiefly for Parsis, the Marathi Dnyan Prasarak Sabha and the Gujarati Hindu Buddhi Vardak Sabha. The issue of female education was resolved by dividing the girls' schools on a linguistic basis into Gujarati Hindu schools, Parsi schools teaching Anglo-Vernacular standards, and Marathi schools. Parsi schools flourished partly due to the Parsi community's decision to adopt Western values and lifestyle. Gujarati Hindu schools had consolidated their position by 1865 when they received support from rich banias (moneylenders) such as Mangaldas Nathubhai and Bhagvandas Purshotamdas. It was the Marathi schools which lagged behind due to lack of support and patronage from the Marathi-speaking Hindu communities. Ultimately the schools had to be supported by monthly contributions from the professional middle classes of the Chitpavan and Saraswat Brahmins and the Pathare Prabhus.⁴ In Poona, the earliest school for low-caste girls was opened by Jyotiba Phule in 1841 and was run by Savitribai Phule. His foster mother, Sagunabai, ran a school in 1848 within Poona which taught low-caste girls up to the primary level.⁵

Government policy towards women's education was marked by apathy until 1854. The East India Company had refused to undertake any responsibility on the grounds of religious neutrality. Mountstuart Elphinstone, who worked a great deal for the improvement of boys' education, was absolutely silent on the issue of education of women, and his long Minutes of over eighty paragraphs do not contain a single

³For details see S. Natarajan, A century of social reform in India, (Bombay, 1959), pp.52-54; and C. Dobbin, Urban leadership in western India: Politics and communities in Bombay city, 1840-85, (London, 1972), pp.55-60.

⁴Dobbin, ibid., p.58.

⁵M.G.Mali, Krantijyoti Savitribai Jotirao Phule (The revolutionary Savitribai Jyotirao Phule) (Marathi), p.68 and 93.

reference to it.⁶ The responsibility for the education of women was formally accepted by the government in 1854 (Educational Despatch). Small rewards were offered to male primary teachers who would form girls' classes in their schools. In 1864-5, the proceeds of the local fund became available, and it was then that the Department started more girls' schools. In 1870-1, there were 218 girls' schools with 9,190 pupils in the whole of the Presidency.

The only notable achievement during 1870-80 was the establishment of two training colleges for women by the Bombay Government in Poona(1870) and Ahmedabad(1871). They were the creation of Miss Mary Carpenter, a well-known English social worker in the field of juvenile delinquency and penal reform. She visited India four times between 1866 and 1870, and on her suggestion the Bombay Government decided to provide training colleges for women. These colleges faced immense problems due to many difficulties which will be dealt with later in the chapter.⁷

A wide divergence existed between the colonial state's utterances and its practice in the field of female education. This discrepancy is well reflected in the Report of the Education Commission of 1882-3. The Commission treated the subject seriously and studied all the problems associated with women's education and made recommendations on almost every aspect of female education. However, none of these recommendations had any far-reaching repercussions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the government had withdrawn from the field entirely. It did not advocate an expansion of girls' schools under the direct control of government, nor did it spell out clearly its financial policy on this issue. The only section in the bulky report which was to foster women's education was on 'non-official co-operation'. The government promised that wherever Indian agencies came forward to promote the cause of female education they would be given, 'a share in the supervision of the schools'.⁸

⁶J.S., Richey, Selections from Educational Records, Part II, (Calcutta, 1922), pp.67-89.

⁷S.Nurullah and J.P. Naik., A history of education in India during the British period, (Bombay, 1955), pp.390-91.

⁸Report of the Indian Education Commission 1882-83, p.548, (IOL).

None of the Department's Girls' Schools offered secondary education before 1882 in the provincial towns of the Bombay Presidency. Even among the schools run by missionary and Indian agencies, there were only a handful of girls in Standard V and VI.⁹ The statistics compiled by the Department of Public Instruction for the year 1882-83, revealed that there were no scholars above Standard IV in Poona, Solapur, Satara, Ratnagiri, Thana, Kolaba and the Marathi schools of Bombay.¹⁰

The impetus for the popularisation of higher education for women was brought about only after the establishment of a 'respectable' High School for girls in Poona by the most influential male reformers of nineteenth-century Maharashtra.

Establishment of the Poona High School for Native Girls

By 1882 public opinion in Maharashtra had conceded that girls might be permitted to receive primary education.¹¹ Public opinion was mirrored in the debates over female education in the 1880s. In towns there was no real opposition and acceptance of elementary education for girls was reported in villages such as Ratnagiri, where the local inspector remarked that illiterate mothers sent their daughters to the village school even though they were motivated for the wrong reasons, such as 'keeping them out of mischief'.¹² New issues in the debates included the differentiation in the curriculum of girls' schools, separate schools for females, male or female teachers and inspectors in girls' schools, and the admittance of the female children of prostitutes in girls' schools.

Throughout the social reform period, the most persistent argument for female education was one which held that for an enlightened race, an enlightened mother was absolutely essential. Ranade's opinion was that the most important role for a woman

⁹There were only two students enrolled in Standard V and VI in the entire city of Bombay. Compiled from the examination results of Bombay Presidency in Annual Report of the Director of Public Instruction of Bombay Presidency for the year 1882-83, (Education Department), hereafter E.D., 1883, Vol.2, Comp. No.3, (MSA).

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Nurullah and Naik, A history of education, p.398.

¹²From Annual Report of the Director of Public Instruction in the Bombay Presidency for the year 1881-2, p.74, (MSA).

was motherhood and teaching the young ones at home. He stated that imparting education to a woman was of immense importance as she should be the one 'to train the young in the most susceptible period of life to lisp the lessons which are never learnt in matured(sic) life'.¹³ Many of the educated middle classes in the bigger towns of Maharashtra in the 1880s found a lack in their wives, whose lifestyles and outlook had not changed. They could not communicate with them on any non-household matter. A few of them tried educating women at home but the situation was unsatisfactory. S.P. Pandit, an influential Poona-based social reformer, articulated this need clearly in his letter on 'Female Education in Bombay Presidency' to the government. He said:

the educated male population especially in the larger towns is forming new habits, acquiring new tastes, and imbibing aspirations which a refined and cultivated social life alone can gratify, such social life is rendered impossible by the almost total neglect of the work of educating the female world...¹⁴

The need for intellectual companionship and for a helpmate beyond domestic matters was an important reason for men to seek to educate their wives. Meredith Borthwick has noted a similar trend in nineteenth-century Bengal in the education of the bhadramahila (middle-class women).¹⁵

An extremely significant shift took place in Maharashtra in the 1880s in the attitudes and motives of male reformers in the advocacy of women's education. In the mid-nineteenth century, woman's low status was considered to be a result of a degenerate Indian society. Her ignorance was attributed to the rigidity of the Hindu religious texts and stagnant customs. She was thought to be a victim of social conditions and therefore she was to be educated. But in the 1880s male reformers

¹³His speech during the annual prize-distribution ceremony of the High School for Native Girls on 29 Sept.1885; extract from (E.D), 1886, Vol.37, Comp.no.2, (MSA).

¹⁴From S.P.Pandit, to Lee Warner, Director of Public Instruction, Bombay Government, n.d., in (E.D), 1886, Vol.37, Comp.no.2, (MSA).

¹⁵Meredith Borthwick, The changing role of women in Bengal, 1850-1905, (Princeton, 1984), pp.60-108.

increasingly pointed a finger at Indian women as the upholders of tradition and as the ones who retarded social reform and progress.¹⁶

In a letter to the government pleading for state support to the Poona Girls' High School, S.P. Pandit argued that conservatism and 'three-fourths of what is popularly understood by the term religion are in the minds of mothers, mothers-in-law and grandmothers'.¹⁷ Therefore, to remove these obstacles to social reform, women had to be educated. Ranade also voiced similar thoughts when he said that Hindu society was, 'being dragged down by the weight of our own members'.¹⁸

From being a victim of Hindu society and custom, the Indian woman was increasingly associated with retarding the growth of modern ideas and social reform schemes. While women's ignorance and conservatism was used as a symbol to cloak the inaction or compromises by liberal Indians, it served a different function in the case of reformers during the process of negotiating with the government regarding the establishment of the High School for Girls' in Poona.

Reformist ideology on gender issues was intertwined with the politics of the period in a complex network. Male reformers holding high posts in the various administrative departments of the colonial government in Maharashtra had been excluded from any real participation in the executive powers of the Educational Department. They were not consulted on any of the major decisions affecting girls' education, such as the choice of textbooks prescribed for study, segregation or co-education, female or male teachers, low-caste and high-caste girls in the same schools, hours of attendance and vacations. Throughout the 1870s, however, they continued to voice this need to participate by petitioning and by expressing their opinion through the vernacular and Anglo-vernacular press. The main issue that generated friction was the nature of education for girls. There was a strong preference for

¹⁶See Chapters One, Two and Three for the ways in which women contested such representations.

¹⁷(E.D), 1886, Vol.37, Comp.no.2, (MSA).

¹⁸Speech by M.G.Ranade at the Annual Prize Distribution Ceremony of the Poona High School for Native Girls, (E.D), 1886, Vol.37, Comp.no.3, (MSA).

a set of books containing information as regards the duties of wives towards their husbands, fathers and mothers-in-law, the treatment of children, household management, etc.¹⁹

The values of obedience to husband, duty (both filial and towards the in-laws), were clearly to be instilled into the minds of girls for the purpose of perpetuating the patriarchal family. However, the Government showed no sign of meeting their demands, and apprehension grew over the question of the transfer of the private schools of Bombay to the Education Department. An acrimonious debate began which was expressed in the vernacular press. The Bombay Samachar put it succinctly:

If that Department is not prepared to do this, it is better to leave the schools in the hands of those persons who manage them at present; because some subjects suitable to the proper education of girls are taught on a small scale in these schools; but if these schools pass into the hands of the Government, those subjects will most probably be given up under the present arrangements of the Educational Department in regard to girls' schools in general.²⁰

Similarly, the press expressed disappointment when the Annual Report of the Director of Public Instruction (1881-2), revealed no attempts at producing a different set of school-books for girls embodying topics which they felt were suitable for Indian girls.²¹

Conservatives felt that higher education for women would undermine male control in the home. Education for women, unless strictly regulated, was perceived as a release from subjection to male authority. It invited trouble in the form of rebellious daughters, adulterous wives and arrogant sisters. A case of a Maratha girl educated up to high school-level in Kolhapur who refused to live with her husband, along with the famous Rakhmabai case, were cited as evil consequences of higher education.²² Some vernacular papers, such as Native Opinion, opposed high school education for women

¹⁹Samsher Bahadur, 4 Jan.1879, (NNR).

²⁰Bombay Samachar, 20 Apr.1878, (NNR).

²¹Indu Prakash, 3 Feb.1883, (NNR).

²²Dnyan Sagar, 16 Jun.1888, (NNR).

on the grounds that it would make girls unfit for the drudgery which comprised most household work. Such fears were not unfounded, as the reforming circles also realised that domestic chores involved an unrelenting routine and monotony. Education, then, might provide an escape route for women. This fear was a strong motive for Maharashtrian men in their conflict with the Education Department over what was being taught to girls in state-run schools. Education was supposed to mould a man's outlook on life and this was held true for women too. However, an education consisting of the natural sciences, history, and mathematics was considered to make girls 'bookish' and taught them to think on their own, leading ultimately to rebellion.²³

By the 1880s it was increasingly clear to both orthodox and progressive men that if they wanted to regulate the education of girls, they would have to take the initiative under private enterprise. Such ideas crystallised when the opportunity presented itself in the form of a huge donation by Sir W. Wedderburn, a prominent judge serving in Poona, offered in memory of his deceased brother towards the expansion of female education in the Deccan.²⁴ Members of the Brahmin elites under the leadership of M.G. Ranade and R.G. Bhandarkar called a meeting on 19 July 1884 to gauge the support of the Poona public and impressed upon them the opportunities created by Wedderburn's donation. During the proceedings a committee was formed, consisting of influential gentlemen to represent Maharashtrian public opinion. A deputation headed by Jayasingrao Apa Saheb Ghatge, Chief of Kajal and Regent of Kolhapur and a committee of leading reformers worked out proposals for the establishment of a high school for girls. The school was intended to teach girls up to the Matriculation standard of the University of Bombay.²⁵

The proposals embodied in this deputation contained a novel experiment to be tried for the first time in the history of women's education in India. The Poona High School for Girls was to be classified as a government institution to be aided by Indian

²³Bombay Samachar, 20 Apr. 1878, (NNR).

²⁴Proceedings in (E.D), 1884, Vol.11, Comp.no.399, (MSA).

²⁵M.G. Ranade et al., to J.B. Richey, Acting Chief Secretary, Government of Bombay, 31 Aug. 1884, (E.D), 1884, Vol.32, Comp.no.181, (MSA).

managers. For an initial period of twenty-five years it was to be financed by the Education Department and managed by a School Committee of Maharashtrian intelligentsia. While the Education Department paid for the salaries of teaching staff, school appliances and seventy-five percent of the rent of provisional school buildings, the Committee was responsible for miscellaneous expenditure such as scholarships, annual prizes, carriage hire and a quarter of the rent of the school buildings.²⁶ In financial terms alone, this meant the government had to bear two-thirds of the cost of establishing and maintaining the school. But the more unusual demands were the powers the School Committee claimed for itself. Some of the important general conditions were:

- (a) The school will be open to girls from respectable families from all castes of natives.
- (b) The school staff must consist entirely of lady teachers.
- (c) No fees will be levied as a start.²⁷

Some of the main powers claimed by the School Board were unprecedented in the history of women's education in India. They related to the following items:

- (a) The Board alone should have the power of admitting girls to the school.
- (b) The Board will administer and control the proceeds of the private funds and contributions including those from municipal sources.
- (c) The School Board should be consulted as regards the appointments of all teachers.
- (d) The Board will regulate the course of studies in the School, fix the standards, make rules for the general management of the School, e.g. for the hours of attendance, holidays, vacations, etc.
- (e) The Board will visit and examine and superintend the School and will advise on all matters regarding it.²⁸

Higher education for women from then onwards in Bombay Presidency came to be linked with a caste-and-class bias, as the Poona High School for Girls became a exemplar with only 'respectable girls' allowed to take advantage of such education.

²⁶Ibid.,

²⁷Ibid.,

²⁸Ibid.,

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A separate education was created through a separate syllabus and a notion of segregation was also imbued in a more rigid form by appointing female teachers, inspectors and matrons. Some of the most important post-independence educationalists of India believed that an absolutely separate system of education for girls with separate schools, separate text-books, syllabus and women teachers was due to the, 'prevailing opinion in the nineteenth century'.²⁹ Notions of segregation were, however, part of a conscious policy carried out by leading male reformers which they articulated in their policies and institutions.

A long drawn out battle lasting several years was fought between the School Board and the Government of Bombay before the Board was granted the above powers. It was inevitable that the government reacted negatively at first to the idea of supporting an educational experiment bearing two-thirds of the cost and having no executive authority over it. In this aspect, the Acting Chief Secretary wrote to the Director of Public Instruction:

Every rupee of the building fund has been drawn from native chiefs and nothing had been subscribed by the 'Council' or ordinary Poona citizens. Much help has been obtained from Gujarat Chiefs who have no personal interest in the School. And the site which 'the Council and not the Government' has 'provided' is the gift of the Chief of Sangli. It must be agreeable for gentlemen to have higher education provided for their girls in this way and there is not much of 'patient self-denial' in it.³⁰

It was not until November 1885 that the government finally agreed to concede to the Board absolute powers over admission of girls to the School and to 'co-ordinate powers' with the Department in all other respects.³¹ It was one of the biggest concessions given during this period by the colonial government to an Indian agency.

Sexual politics seem to be integrally tied to male-dominated education schemes.

²⁹J.P. Naik (ed.), A review of education in Bombay State, p.390.

³⁰Resolution of Governor-in-Council regarding provision of funds in connection with the Poona Native Girls' High School, (E.D), 1885, Vol.38, Comp.no.47, (MSA).

³¹Letter from Lee Warner, Director of Public Instruction, to the Chief Secretary to Government of Bombay, 9 Nov.1885, (E.D), 1885, Vol.37, Comp.no.2, (MSA).

When the movement for higher education for women began in the 1880s, large numbers of female social reformers came forth to assist in pecuniary and other ways. Lady Umabai Saheb Bivalkar, Inamdar of Alibag, whose family was known for the intellectual attainments of its women members, offered a sum of Rs.3,000 to found a scholarship in the proposed school. She wrote to the Council expressing her delight at the establishment of a high school for girls, saying: 'in a country where the women are kept without education, one of the elements in the prosperity of the people is wantonly and culpably thrown away'.³² There were smaller donations from many ladies of the Presidency. The Arya Mahila Samaj of Poona handed a memorandum to the Council signed by one hundred women of all classes and castes of Poona, fully sympathising and expressing their support to the movement.³³

When Sir James Fergusson, the Governor of Bombay, laid the foundation stone for the High School building at Huzur Paga on 4 March 1883, he remarked on the fact that more than half of 3,000 people present were women.³⁴ A common argument at the time was that competent Indian women were a rarity, but it is true that large numbers of self-educated women were actively associated in the Arya Mahila Samaj of Bombay and Poona. Pandita Ramabai had already started the 'Sharada Sadan' to educate girls and had yet to acquire the proselytising reputation which she was to gain a decade later. Other Hindu female reformers like Ramabai Ranade had supported the movement for higher education for women by public speeches and participation. Moreover, in 1881 Mrs. Mitchell, the Superintendent of the Poona Training College for Women had spoken in glowing terms of the members of the Poona Native Ladies Association whom she recommended as, 'having been educated, are active in the cause of female education'.³⁵

Nonetheless, women were deliberately excluded from any position of authority which would enable them to influence policy for the education of girls, as they

³²Quote from Bombay Gazette, 11 Aug. 1884, in (E.D), 1884, Vol.38, (MSA).

³³Ibid.,

³⁴(E.D), 1884, Vol.11, Comp.no.399, (MSA).

³⁵Ibid.,

remained unrepresented on the School Board. The government followed the same policy, though with greater subtlety. Instead of excluding them completely, a 'Board of Native Lady Visitors' was constituted to visit periodically the High School, five subsidiary girls' schools and the Teachers' Training College for Women. They had to report any suggestions or recommendations to the School Board which was to decide whether they were of sufficient importance to be brought to the notice of the Inspector.³⁶

It was highly unlikely that male reformers would have vested executive powers in female reformers in the nineteenth century. In fact, the manner in which the movement for higher education of women was conducted showed the overwhelming concern of male elites to control the movement and to pattern it according to their needs rather than allow any emancipatory notions which might have been raised or incorporated by women in a cause which was geared to their progress.

Thus, it is no surprise to find women's organisations during the period adopting the same structures as male public bodies. This sort of mimicry was not a blind emulation but came from their experience of participating as 'visitors' in male-initiated schemes of education. Ramabai Ranade, for example, gave influential men a corresponding status of 'visitors' in the Seva Sadan in the belief that any degree of autonomy could be gained through segregation alone.³⁷

The Board argued for more powers in the management of the High School on the single issue of inspiring confidence in the local population and assuring them that the 'school is managed as far as possible in accordance with native ideas of what education should be given to native girls and how it should be given'.³⁸ Regarding the appointment of teachers and the Lady Superintendent of the School, they wrote that only 'respectable' women teachers could make the school a popular institution. And only the Board could assess the respectability, character and reputation of the teachers. Therefore the Board had to be consulted over every appointment, and if they

³⁶Letter from T. Cooke, Acting Director of Public Instruction, Poona to Chief Secretary to the Government, Education Department, 24 Feb.1883, (E.D), 1884, Vol.11, Comp.no.399, (MSA).

³⁷See Chapter Two.

³⁸Letter by M.G.Ranade et al., 31 Aug.1884, (E.D), 1884.

felt that the lady was unsuitable, she had to be removed or reconsidered.

This selectiveness is reflected in the Board's choice and suggestion of Miss Hurford as the Lady Superintendent of the new school. She had served in India in the capacity of a zenana teacher for fifteen years and was well acquainted with Indian customs and manners. Between 1879 and 1883, she had been working in Poona in connection with a Zenana Mission. She had taught approximately fifty girls of elite families in Poona in her capacity as a lady teacher and knew Marathi fairly well. R.G. Bhandarkar, remarking on the Board's choice, said that as the School would:

necessarily be attended by a large number of girls from families to whom Miss Hurford is personally and very favourably known, she will be in a position to start the School under the best possible auspices.³⁹

On the question of admission of girls to the School, the Board was convinced that the Lady Superintendent and the assistant teachers would be strangers to Poona and hence not in a position to judge for themselves the fitness of any candidate for admission to the School. They pointed out that the success of the School depended entirely upon how good a reputation it acquired regarding the respectability and character of the pupils attending it.⁴⁰

The debate over the curriculum issue was integral to the question of whether the girls were to receive a professional education or vocational training. The initiators of the movement for the higher education of women were clear at the outset that women were not going to receive a training geared to employment. Their rejection of the existing Poona Female Training College, where their daughters could have easily learnt what they were to learn later in the High School, was based on the contention that this particular institution

affords no provision for the education of girls whose fathers or other guardians do not wish to see them bound to be schoolmistresses but who seek education apart

³⁹R.G.Bhandarkar et al., to K.M. Chatfield, Director of Public Instruction, 2 Sept.1884, (E.D), 1885, Vol.38, Comp.no.47, (MSA).

⁴⁰Ranade et al., to J.B. Richey, 31 Aug.1884, (E.D), 1884.

from any such intentions.⁴¹

Maharashtrian girls were to be taught to become skilled housewives, accomplished companions and hostesses and competent mothers by the type of education they were to receive in the High School. R.G. Bhandarkar outlined the Board's policy on this issue:

We do not propose in this institution to make our women learned and teach them to neglect their household duties and take to books. What we intend to do is to make them more fit to discharge these duties.⁴²

It was thus that needle-work, fine embroidery and music lessons, child care, the nursing of sick and elderly people, Marathi, and the acquirement of culinary skills, found a greater emphasis in the syllabus of the School. Arithmetic, English, and Sanskrit were taught to the higher classes. The Poona High School for Native Girls adopted an Anglo-vernacular medium where English was given a greater emphasis instead of being made into a 'subsidiary' subject, as in the Bethune institution in Bengal.⁴³ The reason for choosing the English language as a medium was that the Maharashtrian woman could then get a comparative perspective on social issues. All the liberal influences from Europe was supposed to penetrate the minds of Maharashtrian women and thus make them enthusiasts for the social reform movement in India.⁴⁴

The rapid expansion of boys' schools in the mid-nineteenth century was a direct corollary of the opening of administrative posts and professions to men. In the

⁴¹Speech by S.P. Pandit quoted in Bombay Gazette, 11 Aug.1884; Extract from (E.D), 1884, Vol.11, Comp.no.399, (MSA).

⁴²Quote from Times of India, 10 Oct.1891; extract from (E.D), 1885, Vol.38, Comp.no.47, (MSA).

⁴³Borthwick, The changing role of women, pp.74-75.

⁴⁴Speech by R.G. Bhandarkar at the prize-distribution ceremony of the four institutions run by the Maharashtra Female Education Society. Reported in Times of India, 10 Oct.1891; extract from (E.D), 1891, Vol.60, Comp.no.87, (MSA).

case of girls' schools, without prospects of employment, how did the reformers intend to attract women to an Anglo-vernacular education? A conscious policy on this all-important question was devised by male reformers. The Board instituted a system of economic incentives by generous scholarships, prizes, tuition waivers for the first three years for all students, and after the completion of three years, fees were compulsory for those girls who could afford it, and the School offered free carriage services to pick up girls from their houses and take them back in the evenings. They created a separate expenditure item called 'Encouragement to students', and private donations were utilised for it. It is significant that this item was handled entirely by the Board, whose idea it was in the first place. The government refused to participate in this venture. However, Rs.330 were to be spent per month on this item alone, which was very high when compared to the Rs.750 which the government spent every month on the rent of the buildings, salaries for the Lady S.P., and five assistant lady teachers.⁴⁵ In 1888, the School's expenditure on scholarships was Rs.1,992 per annum. Every month 19 to 22 girls received scholarships and prizes.⁴⁶ This amounted to about Rs.4 per annum in cash and a further Rs.4 in prizes and other incentives to girls who showed even a little intelligence and diligence in their work. It was no wonder that the Governor of Bombay referred to it as a 'little salary' for a 'high class education'.⁴⁷

Instead of incurring a huge loss of finance through a system of incentives, it might have been easier to have made the education employment-oriented. However, the anxiety and willingness to create and maintain a costly private Scholarship Fund was more appealing to the Board. This demonstrated the strength of the male desire to avoid professional training for women at all costs in contrast to the educational enterprises started by women like Pandita Ramabai and Ramabai Ranade.⁴⁸

During the years 1885-90, the School registered a fair amount of success. One

⁴⁵Annual Report of the Female High School at Poona, 1888-89, (E.D), 1889, Vol.32, Comp.no.815, (MSA). 1889., MSA.

⁴⁶(E.D), 1885, Vol.38, Comp.no.47, (MSA).

⁴⁷Ibid.,

⁴⁸See Chapters One and Two for details.

of the most encouraging signs was that it was able to attract a new school-going age for girls, especially from 12 years to 16 years. According to T.B.Kirkham, the Educational Inspector, there were 27 girls out of 58 who were above 12 years of age in 1886, and then it increased to 39 in the following year.⁴⁹ Girls above 13 years were also increasing in numbers rather than declining.⁵⁰ As regards marital status, there are no statistics until 1891. However, Mr. Kirkham, Educational Inspector, reported a favourable change in social opinion, quoting 42 out of 56 girls as unmarried, 9 married and 5 widows in 1885.⁵¹

A breakdown of the various castes to which the pupils belonged reveals the striking fact that Brahmins dominated the school from its inception. The clear-cut policy of the School Board in making the school 'respectable' by excluding low-caste girls, and by including notions of segregation through the creation of a separate syllabus and female staff only, seemed to have attracted girls belonging to the professional middle classes of Poona, who were again largely recruited from the Poona Brahmins. The statistics compiled by the Educational Inspector shows that the majority of girls came from a Brahmin background on the rolls of the school in three years (1886-88).⁵² Brahmins numbered 19 in 1886 out of 58, 20 out of 61 in 1887, and 14 out of 56 in 1888. There were no Muslim girls in 1886 and 1887 and only two in 1888.⁵³

The School later became an elitist institution catering for the educational needs of the female members of the princely families, Sardars and influential reforming homes. The trend was set in the 1880s when Indian men tried to control the admission of girls and regulate the curriculum. Even though Christian and Muslim

⁴⁹The figures are from 'Report on the prospects and position of the Female High School, Poona', by T.B.Kirkham, Educational Inspector to the Director of Public Instruction, Bombay, 17 Oct.1888, (E.D), 1888, Vol.32, Comp.no.815, (MSA).

⁵⁰For example, the number of girls enrolled in the school above the age of sixteen increased from five in 1886 to thirteen in 1887, Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

girls were admitted, they belonged to influential wealthy families, while there were no girls from the lowest strata like Mahars and Mangs, a marked contrast to the schools set up by women.⁵⁴ Thus a caste and class biased institution was created by male reformers. This bias had an adverse effect on the gender politics of the twentieth century, when women studying in such elite institutions took control of women's organisations and addressed themselves specifically to elite women's issues alone.

Poona Female Training College and the creation of the Maharashtra Female Education Society

The oldest Female Training College in Bombay Presidency was established at Poona in 1870. It was the pioneering scheme of Mary Carpenter, who was of the opinion that the slow progress in women's education was due to the absence of trained women teachers. Her reputation and influence secured the support of the Bombay Government in establishing two female training colleges in the Bombay Presidency. Gopal Hari Deshmukh, one of the most influential social reformers, suggested harnessing the energies of Hindu widows in this direction, as the girls who came out of the Bombay schools were married young and faced many obstacles in taking up employment of this nature.⁵⁵

The Poona Female Training College began as an institution with welfare objectives rather than educational ones. It attracted widows to a teachers' training course with incentives through generous stipends. This policy of the Educational Department proved harmful for the movement of primary education for girls, because the college in 1884 had amongst its rolls 17 married (though deserted) women, and 14 widows, a total of 31 out of 42 trainees.⁵⁶ It was reported by the Educational Inspectors that this enrolment had stigmatised the institution, as whenever the women took up employment as schoolmistresses of primary schools for girls, the schools

⁵⁴Chapter One shows that Christian feminists included low-caste pupils in their schools.

⁵⁵Correspondence of Lokahitavadi to Miss Carpenter. In J.E. Carpenter, Life and work of Mary Carpenter, (London, 1879), pp.282-85.

⁵⁶In a letter by T.B.Kirkham, Educational Inspector to Director of Public Instruction, Poona, 2 Feb.1884, (E.D), 1884, Vol.11, Comp.no.399, (MSA).

suffered in attendance and faced closure.⁵⁷ In 1884, seeing the success of the Poona Female High School under the judicious management of the School Board, it occurred to the Acting Director of Public Instruction that the same Committee of Indian gentlemen might be appointed to supervise the Female Training College. It was hoped that this Committee would provide the much-needed status to make it function efficiently.

Realising the advantages of incorporating another institution for the higher education of women in their field of social reform work, the School Board promptly agreed, but attached certain conditions to it. In the beginning the idea had grown out of the School Board being a 'consultative' body, but the Board suggested that if it was given certain powers such as absolute control over admission of pupils to the College and co-ordinate powers over the appointment of teachers without financial liabilities, it would take over the management of the College.⁵⁸

The Education Department hesitated to part with decision-making powers, and the negotiations dragged on for a couple of years, and only in 1889 were plans ultimately realised. More important than the disagreement over executive powers was the wide divergence between government and Indian reformers on the methods to be employed for the education of girls.⁵⁹ The government had a uniform policy of educating children of all classes and castes, irrespective of their status in social hierarchies. If the Board were to be given complete control over admissions and scholarships, it was feared that the College would be filled with the daughters of the members of the Committee or their friends, on whom the scholarships would be bestowed, while the cost of maintaining English lady teachers would be borne by the

⁵⁷T.B. Kirkham, Educational Inspector to T. Cooke, Acting Director of Public Instruction, Poona, 18 Sept.1884, (E.D), 1884, Vol.11, Comp.no.399, (MSA).

⁵⁸Letter by N.Dandekar, Joint Secretary, Maharashtra Female Education Society, to K.M.Chatfield, Director of Public Instruction, Poona, 29 Sept.1889, (E.D), 1889, Vol.13, Comp.no.278, (MSA).

⁵⁹See the correspondence between the Director of Public Instruction, Poona, and the Secretary to Government of Bombay, (E.D), 1888, Vol.32, Comp.no.815, (MSA).

government.⁶⁰ In addition to this, the other castes would have no representatives in the College.

This dilemma was resolved by the Board's relinquishing the powers over admission but holding on to the Endowment Fund. The government was shrewd enough to see that by giving a few important concessions to the Poona Brahmins, the Training College, which had suffered from extremely low social esteem, would be secured a better social status and, since it was a government institution, the credit would finally go to the government.⁶¹ The committee of Maharashtrian reformers appointed to hold positions of authority consisted of nine members. The most important were M.G.Ranade, R.G.Bhandarkar, N.B.Dandekar, M.Kunte and K.L.Nulkar.

This Committee was simultaneously moving towards forming a society in 1885. They realised the immense possibilities of enlarging the scope of the work besides ensuring the proper management of the High School at Poona and of primary and other schools started (or to be started) as feeders to the High School. By means of a regular constitution governed by rules and regulations, the proposed society would provide better guarantees for the funds, buildings and endowments belonging to the local communities. In 1885 the Committee of the School formed itself into a society called the Maharashtra Female Education Society. Under the Act XXI of 1860 for the Registration of Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies, it assumed the status of a regular institution by 1888. The objectives of the Society, as stated in its memorandum of 1888, were:

the provision and encouragement of the higher education of native girls in Poona, the Deccan, the Konkan and the Southern Maratha Country by means of schools established, aided or controlled by the Society.⁶²

⁶⁰From K.M.Chatfield, Poona, to the Secretary to Government, Educational Department, 23 Sept.1889, (E.D), 1889, Vol.13, Comp.no.278, (MSA).

⁶¹Governor-in-Council's observations in *ibid*.

⁶²'Memorandum of the Association known as the Maharashtra Female Education Society', item 2, (E.D), 1888, Vol.77, Comp.no.496, (MSA).

The Council nominated a 'Lady Visitors Board' consisting of European and Indian women whose powers were limited to arrangements for boarding and lodging facilities for students from outside Poona.⁶³

Applications for admission to any of the schools administered by the Society were subject to close scrutiny by the committee and it retained the right to dismiss applications which were found unsatisfactory.⁶⁴ It retained equal powers with the government in prescribing subjects of study and could offer suggestions in all other areas of administration. High schools under the society adopted the Anglo-Vernacular Standards and only girls who had passed the Third Standard Vernacular were to be admitted to secondary schools.

The Society had four major institutions under its management by 1890: the Poona High School for Girls; the Female Training College for School Mistresses; the Practising School for Women; and a Primary School. The takeover of these institutions by a society comprised of influential Maharashtrian leaders perceptibly improved their performance. Statistics show that the Society's takeover was a distinct advantage to the Poona Brahmins and other high-caste communities. In the High School there were 20 Brahmins, 9 Marathas, 8 Parbhus, altogether numbering 37 out of 71 girls on the rolls.⁶⁵ In the Training College Brahmins and Marathas comprised 22 out of 38, a very large number.⁶⁶ In the four institutions as a whole Brahmins were 84, Parbhus 18, Marathas 40, altogether 142 out of 227.⁶⁷ Pupils belonging to the high castes were more than half the strength of the Schools and Colleges run by the Society.

That prejudices against higher education for women were reduced in an educational enterprise run by Indians can be gauged by the increasing number of married students among Hindus coming forth for higher education. But this increase was obtained by the 'respectability' tag and at the cost of not having widows join the

⁶³Ibid., item 9.

⁶⁴Ibid., items 11 and 12.

⁶⁵Taken from 'Report of the Maharashtra Female Education Society for the year 1890-91', in (E.D), 1891, Vol.60, Comp.no.87, (MSA).

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

institutions. Table VII shows that 15 married Brahmin girls, 13 married Maratha girls and 11 among other caste-Hindus were continuing education in addition to their household duties.⁶⁸ However the number of widows did not increase. Table VII shows that only 15 out of 227 students were widows. This is a startling contrast to the schools run by Pandita Ramabai and Ramabai Ranade where widows formed a high proportion of the students.⁶⁹

The Maharashtra Female Education Society was a significant landmark in the development of the higher education of women. It represented a political shift in the assumption of independent powers by an Indian agency. Much more significant was the great degree of control it assumed over the movement for the higher education of women in Maharashtra. In the hands of the leading male reformers of the century, the Maharashtra Female Education Society set the standards for the next century in higher education for women. However, by emphasising the reproductive roles of women it created separate schooling for girls and retarded the growth of professional and employment-oriented training of women.

Medical aid and education of women

In urban areas of Maharashtra, the traditional sueni (midwife) was gradually being replaced by midwives who had obtained a formal training in European hospitals. Suenis were women who had attained midwifery skills under mothers or grandmothers, and the job had acquired a hereditary occupational status. The European and government hospitals were staffed by nurses and sisters who were recruited from England and other parts of Europe. This system continued to be followed until well into the twentieth century. Due to the contempt and disdain in which the suenis were held, the very idea of recruiting them for European hospitals was a repugnant one, but they were thought to be suitable for employment in female wards of private hospitals provided they were given a formal training in midwifery. This need was realised by the establishment of a Marathi Midwife Class in Grant Medical College, Bombay, in

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹See Chapters One and Two.

1871.⁷⁰ The medium of instruction was Marathi and Dr.Sakharam Arjun, known for his participation in social reform issues, taught this class without payment from 1871 to 1878. During this period around twenty-eight women were successful in earning a certificate to practise midwifery.⁷¹ In the absence of statistics, we may conjecture that many of them were enrolled from the Indian Christian or Jewish communities and only occasionally the Hindu community. Some of these midwives showed great promise, as is seen in the case of Mrs Rebecca Simeon who published a book on midwifery in the Marathi language in order to assist midwives.⁷² Many of them began private practice in and around Bombay in the 1880s.

Neither Indian nor European male doctors felt any kind of threat from the existence of the Marathi and European Midwife Class. However, there was a dramatic shift in the 1880s when a movement for bringing medical aid to Indian women was set afoot by an ambitious scheme, namely the Countess of Dufferin Fund. This Fund was established with the aim to build hospitals for women, to train women as nurses and midwives, to give scholarships to women who desired professional education in medicine, to promote child-welfare and ante-natal care, and to take such steps as might be necessary to reduce infant mortality and the death rate among women during childbirth. Although, other organisations such as the National Indian Association and individuals in wealthy or influential positions like the American philanthropist Mr.Kittredge and a Parsi leader, Mr.Sorabji Shapurji Bengali were already in the field, the Dufferin Fund raised the status of the movement for medical aid for women.

The Committee of the Dufferin Fund publicised the immense miseries and suffering of Indian women who died in their thousands due to medical neglect or on account of their inhibitions in confiding to male doctors. The need for training female doctors was given priority and tremendous pressure was put on provincial governments

⁷⁰Extract from the Annual Report of Grant Medical College in Annual Report of the Director of Public Instruction, Bombay Presidency, 1885-86, Appendix F, p.x., (MSA).

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Rebecca Simeon, The Midwife or the delivery of women in labours, and injurious practices connected therewith, 1879, from Catalogue of Printed Books in Marathi in Bombay Presidency, 31 December 1879, (Bombay, 1880).

to open the doors of the various medical colleges in India for training women doctors on a more lenient basis.

The Dufferin Fund was not motivated entirely by philanthropic motives but had other considerations too. In England, even though women were admitted to medical degrees after 1877, it was an extremely uphill task for them to practise, due to acute sexual discrimination.⁷³ Naturally, English women turned to the colonies for employment. Dr. Edith Pechey, who was the first physician in charge of the Obstetric Section of the Cama Hospital in Bombay, was a prime example of a woman doctor who had to struggle to acquire a medical degree in Edinburgh University.⁷⁴ In the absence of a practice, she went on an extended vacation to Italy, France and Egypt between 1877 and 1882. While in Vienna, she received a letter from the pioneering woman in medicine, Miss Elizabeth Garrett-Anderson, asking her if she would like to take charge of a hospital for women and children in Bombay. Dr. Pechey agreed instantly and from then onwards she was given the epithet of being 'the pioneer practitioner of the Medical Women for India movement'.⁷⁵ The Dufferin Fund at that time left unresolved many issues, such as whether to teach Indian nurses or to import European nurses, and whether to import European lady doctors or to train Indian women doctors.

A study of the proceedings between the government and the Grant Medical College, Jamshedji Jijibhai Hospital, and various other agencies associated with the movement reveals the politics of gender involved in the medical training of women in nineteenth-century Maharashtra. It was generally understood that the objective of the movement was to provide proper medical aid to Indian women by trained allopathic doctors and to replace the services of the sueni or midwife just as the vaids (ayurvedic doctors) were gradually displaced by the Licentiates of Bombay University.

⁷³ Catriona Blake's recent work on the movement of medical women in the nineteenth century shows how Englishwomen eagerly sought the openings made by the movement for medical aid in India. She cites the case of four English women who went to India in 1874 to join the Madras Medical College which had thrown its doors open to women, The charge of the parasols: Women's entry to the medical professions, (London, 1990), pp.175-77.

⁷⁴ E. Lutzker, Edith Pechey-Phipson, M.D. : The story of England's foremost pioneering woman doctor, (New York, 1973), pp.9-12.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp.66-74.

The Principal of the Grant Medical College insisted that the grade of lady practitioners had to correspond to that of the male graduates.⁷⁶ This meant that rules for admission to the degree of Licentiate of Medicine at Grant Medical College would be applicable to female students too. In real terms, it meant an effective exclusion of all Indian women from the medical field because admission was open only to students who had completed their matriculation examination. In the early 1880s women were being admitted to a course in medical education which was inferior in quality to male students but the entrance requirement was not as rigorous as it was for men. The female pupils of the Grant Medical College asserted themselves by sending a petition to the government asking for equality with male students as far as the curriculum was concerned. To quote them:

Our course of instruction on being compared with that appointed for male students shows that we are heavily handicapped in our work. Not only are we supposed to make ourselves thoroughly efficient in a less space of time than the male students, and whilst they have an opportunity of acquiring a thorough knowledge of every subject we have only an opportunity of obtaining a mere 'smattering', of several subjects.⁷⁷

They pleaded that their course should be extended to five years to put them on a par with male students.

The government tried to negotiate with the higher authorities in the medical service who were opposed to any concessions for women by pointing out that only 'suitably educated' female doctors were required and not regular 'Licentiate of Medicine' doctors. It was also pointed out that in Madras University a class of women were trained as non-University medical practitioners. After a protracted battle, the Principal of G.M.C. finally agreed to establish a 'Non-University Class' of female students. This course was analogous to the male grade of 'Hospital Assistant' and

⁷⁶Letter by the Principal of Grant Medical College, to the Director of Public Instruction, 28 Aug. 1884, (E.D), 1884, Vol.12, Comp.no.639, (MSA).

⁷⁷Petition of female pupils to Director of Public Instruction, Bombay, n.d., (E.D), 1884, Vol.12, Comp.no.639, (MSA).

'Apothecary' and was opened only as a 'temporary measure', to last five years, after which there would be no recognition of any qualification below that of Licentiate of Medicine.⁷⁸ Standard VI of the Vernacular grade with a certificate in English was enough to enrol in the course. After qualifying, these students were to be called 'Certificated Practitioners of Medicine'.⁷⁹ No women under twenty years of age were to be admitted. The government reduced the minimum age for admission to eighteen years and removed the restriction of allowing the experiment for five years only. In reply to Dr. H.Cooke's letter demanding the abolition of the Certificated Class after 5 years, the Governor of Bombay minuted that 'it would not at the present stage of the experiment desire to fix a rigid limit for the very useful work of the Certificate Class'.⁸⁰ Many women, including a large number of Parsis and a fair number of Hindu women, took advantage of this diploma. Between 1884 and 1892, on average 14 to 18 women secured the diploma every year.⁸¹ There is no break-down of these figures but the Director of Public Instruction's report occasionally mentions in passing the names of successful women. In 1890-1, two Hindu women were successful in securing the diploma and went to serve in the hospitals of the princely states of Baroda and Indore.⁸²

A significant feature of the movement for medical aid for women was the 'Medical Women for India Fund'. This was started by a wealthy American industrialist, Mr.Kittredge, and Mr.Sorabji Shapurji Bengali of Bombay, who together had won many sceptics over to their plan as well as secured substantial funding.⁸³ Kittredge was influenced by an article he had read in the Contemporary Review on

⁷⁸Letter by C.Gonne, Chief Secretary to Government, Educational Department, to Principal of Grant Medical College, 26 Nov.1883, (E.D), 1885, Vol.2, Comp.no.173, (MSA).

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰(E.D), 1884, Vol.12, Comp.no.639, (MSA).

⁸¹Computed from Annual Reports of the Director of Public Instruction in the Bombay Presidency, 1884-1891, (MSA).

⁸²Annual Report of Director of Public Instruction for Bombay Presidency, 1890-91, (MSA).

⁸³George T. Kittredge, A short history of the medical women for India fund of Bombay, (Bombay, 1889).

the British medical services in India written by Dr. Frances Hoggan. Dr. Hoggan had proposed a new medical department, as part of the public service in India, managed by women alone in harmony with the existing civil medical service. This scheme was an English female doctor's vision of a friction-free, non-competitive world where women were not going to face male jealousy and rivalry. Kittredge was attracted by the notion of 'coordinate powers but no subordination' in this scheme.

This scheme was unrealistic as the government would under no circumstances start a special medical department exclusively for women. Kittredge, however, devised a plan for building a Hospital for Women to be staffed entirely by women, where the training of women doctors would also take place. Initially, he intended that European doctors should be employed on good salaries to train and help establish the position of women in medicine in India. This plan came to fruition when Mr. Pestonji Hormusji Cama came to Poona, ^{and} offered a large sum of money towards the construction of a hospital in Bombay for women and children, to be staffed entirely by women. The government had to provide for the site and maintenance.

Considerable hostility to this scheme was expressed by the staff of the Grant Medical College. Mr. Bengali was informed that the government would agree only under the following conditions:

Government cannot for the reasons assigned by Dr. Carter [Principal of Grant Medical College], which appear conclusive, consent to a stipulation that the Hospital shall at some future time be handed over entirely to the care of women doctors. They will however agree willingly to utilize the services of competent medical women acting under the instruction and guidance of the male superior staff, [sic] when such services are available.⁸⁴

Bengali did all that he could in Bombay to change this ruling, and Kittredge tried to win the support of the India Office in London for the Fund's position of leaving the professional and administrative services of the hospital to women alone. Eventually, the government agreed that the institution could be handed over entirely to the care of women doctors whenever a competent staff was available, but funds for

⁸⁴Ibid., pp.28-34.

payment of salaries had to come from the Fund. In other words, the salaries of the women doctors would have to be met through public contributions, and would not be included in the costs of maintaining the hospital, which the government had agreed to pay. In the end, Bengali agreed and the salaries of the women doctors were met from the Medical Women for India Fund.

Such incidents were common in the history of medical education and training for women in the 1880s. While European female doctors felt the opposition from their male counterparts in the colonies too, Indian women's problems were compounded by an interlacing of gender and race issues.⁸⁵ The first Hindu woman doctor came from the Bombay Presidency as early as 1884. In 1881 Anandibai Joshi outlined in a public speech her reasons for seeking a medical education outside India. She listed male antagonism as the main reasons for her decision to pursue a course in medicine in Philadelphia. She returned in 1884 with a degree and was employed by the Kolhapur princely family to take charge of the female wards and open a Nursing Class in the hospital at Kolhapur.⁸⁶ She was followed by Rakhmabai, who went to London in 1888 for training in medicine on account of the hostility present in Bombay in the 1880s. There were many lesser-known women who applied eagerly for a medical training in the Grant Medical College such as Vithabai Sakham, a school teacher who had obtained leave to study 'the English system of medicine'. When she came to Bombay, she discovered that the only provision available for Indian women was restricted to midwifery. Undeterred, she joined this course and then appealed to the authorities to open a class to train doctors.⁸⁷ The results of her petition are unknown.

In the early part of the twentieth century highly qualified Indian women in the teaching and the medical professions experienced racial discrimination at the hands of the government. One of the main conditions of the Central Committee of the Dufferin Fund for medical posts was that candidates 'must possess a medical qualification registrable in the U.K., under the Medical Act or an Indian or Colonial

⁸⁵See Chapter Two for details on this conflict.

⁸⁶Anandibai Joshi, A speech by a Hindu lady, p.5.

⁸⁷Petition from Vitta Bai Sakham, 22 Nov. 1882, (BEP), 1883, V/1782, No.227, (IOL).

qualification higher than the L.M.S'.⁸⁸ Such criteria were aimed at excluding Indian female applicants for it was clear that there were not many Indian women with degrees over that of an L.M.S., but occasionally enterprising women did apply with the appropriate degrees and much to their surprise were turned down.

Racial prejudice was an experience that made Dr.Nagutai Joshi into a nationalist. She had three medical degrees of which two were from London and Dublin. When she was rejected for a post in the Dufferin Fund medical service she regarded it as unjust and publicised her grievance widely.⁸⁹ She argued that importing medical women from Europe was no longer justifiable as universities in India were training Indian women graduates who were equally competent, if not more so, than those being imported from foreign universities. Further, she alleged that European medical women were less well-equipped than indigenous women doctors because of their lack of knowledge of local languages and social customs. She pleaded:

Let there be fair play. To import Lady Doctors from foreign countries when Indian talent is available, would be a gross injustice not only to the Indian Lady Doctors but also to the country that pays for their services.⁹⁰

Discrimination based on colour was faced by Indian women much earlier. Yashodabai Joshi recalled the working of the Dufferin Committee in Amravati which had enlisted her organisation (Vanita Samaj's) support in helping to find suitable nurses to be trained at the local hospital. Yashodabai wrote that:

whenever Hindu women came forward to apply, the Committee put forward all sorts of criticisms so as to reject them. Therefore the Vanita Samaj withdrew from the Dufferin Committee. Only I stayed on for sometime hoping things would change but

⁸⁸'Women's medical service in India', Mahratta, 9 Nov. 1913.

⁸⁹She wrote about her experience with the colonial authorities in vernacular newspapers. See her letter 6 Oct.1913, Mahratta, 12 Oct. 1913.

⁹⁰Ibid.

eventually I too withdrew.⁹¹

In the early part of the twentieth century Indian women faced intense competition from European women in the profession of teaching too. The earliest recorded instance is in 1889 when Mary Sorabji was denied promotion to the post of Lady Superintendent of the Female Training College by the Educational Department. She protested by petitioning the government showing how despite her seniority and superior qualifications (she held a teacher's certificate from London, had 10 years' experience and knowledge of several Indian languages over that of Laura Brooks, her rival) she had been unjustly superseded.⁹²

However, it was only in the 1900s that women began to agitate more openly against racial discrimination. As more women joined the teaching and medical services and discrimination became more common, it became an issue of contention.⁹³ A good example of Maharashtrian women's protest against gender and racial discrimination is their dissatisfaction in connection with the appointments in the Female Training College of Poona. Under the leadership of Kashibai Kanitkar and Yashodabai Bhat, women organised meetings to discuss their grievances and to appeal for justice.⁹⁴ They argued that when suitably qualified Indian women were available to take up positions within the College they were overlooked. They pointed out that the College was the only one of its kind in Maharashtra but it was conducted in a manner inimical to the sentiments and feelings of the people for whose benefit the institution was intended.

⁹¹Yashodabai Joshi, Our journey together (Marathi), p.61.

⁹²Petition of Mary Sorabji, First Assistant to Lady S.P. High School for Native Girls, Poona, to Lord Reay, Governor of Bombay, 15 Jul.1889,(E.D), 1889, Vol.13, (MSA).

⁹³See Chapter Two for details on the discrimination felt by women from Indian men in the area of education.

⁹⁴Reports of the meetings are in Mahratta, 2 Jul. 1916.

Schemes to train Indian women in nursing

There was great demand for nurses in the 1890s, created both by a rapid expansion of charitable dispensaries endowed by wealthy Parsi and Gujarati bankers and traders in Bombay and Poona and by the fact that almost every government hospital in the Presidency had a female ward run by a staff of European female doctors and Indian matrons. Trained nurses were to replace the Ayah and matrons in these hospitals.

Indian women who pursued a career in nursing were subjected to racial discrimination, as well as that of gender, from the higher authorities - be they doctors, head-nurses, or the Surgeon-General. In fact, they faced all the racial stereotypes which orientalist discourse had embedded in colonial minds regarding the 'slothful', 'dishonest', 'immoral' and 'irresponsible native'.

In 1889 the Thakor Saheb of Bhowanagar gave a lakh of rupees as an endowment for the training and maintenance of nurses at the Jamshetji Jijibhai Hospital connected with the Grant Medical College in Bombay.⁹⁵ The scheme gained momentum when various municipal and local boards of Bombay Presidency promised stipends, scholarships and employment to the nurses who were to be trained in various Bombay hospitals. Even though the Dufferin Fund and the Lady Reay Nurses Fund had provision for this scheme, the amount allotted to train Indian nurses was a pittance when compared to the financial aid for the training of Eurasian and European women doctors and nurses. For example, the Lady Reay Nurses Fund had set aside only Rs.330 per month out of Rs.40,001 for training Indian nurses.⁹⁶

In 1885 the government started consultations with the Jamshetji Jijibhai hospital, Cama Hospital, Grant Medical College and the All Saints Sisters Hospital in order to find out the best methods of recruiting Indian trainee nurses for the Dufferin Fund. The Principal of Grant Medical College evaded the issue by saying that the Honorary Physicians and Surgeons had multifarious tasks and 'would not care to teach women', so it was best left in the hands of female doctors such as Pechey-Phipson. He recommended the sisters of All Saints Hospital, Bombay, as the best

⁹⁵Cited in (BEP), 1896, V/5083, No.96, (IOL).

⁹⁶Proceedings in (General Department), hereafter (G.D), 1891, Vol.47, Comp.no.204, (MSA).

people to contact regarding this scheme.⁹⁷

One objection to the training of Indian nurses was that there was no real demand for them, as European hospitals would not hire their services. And it was believed that Indian men would not incur the expense of employing trained nurses to look after their sick female family members, while if the men fell ill they would expect their families to nurse them.⁹⁸ In fact, in times of acute illness, women were treated in civil hospitals and dispensaries. In Jamsetji Jijibhai Hospital in Bombay, out of a total of 5,652 patients treated in 1881, 4,093 were males and 1,559 were females.⁹⁹ Nurses were in great demand in such hospitals which were staffed by Indian doctors.

Contradictions surfaced as different arguments were put forth by Surgeons-General using different facts to strengthen their opposition to this plan. One Surgeon-General reported that he thought 'Maratha women make excellent midwives', but he doubted whether they would show the same skills in nursing.¹⁰⁰ A doubt was expressed regarding finding any candidates at all from the provincial areas, but another Surgeon-General reported that he had received many applications from Indian women for training in midwifery and nursing but that he was not sure whether they were 'suitable material'.¹⁰¹

There was a preference for recruiting trained nurses from England to fill the hospitals in Bombay Presidency. In 1889 a prominent Surgeon-General, Dr. V. Carter, wrote to the Government regarding the scheme of employing local nurses. He said:

⁹⁷Letter from Principal of Grant Medical College, to Under Secretary, Government of Bombay, 6 Jan. 1890, (G.D), 1890, Vol.53, Comp.no.118, (MSA).

⁹⁸Letter of Deputy Surgeon General, J.J.Hospital to Secretary to Government, 12 Nov.1888, (G.D), 1890, Vol.53, Comp.no.287/1, (MSA).

⁹⁹Administration Report on the Civil Hospitals and Dispensaries Under the Government of Bombay for the Year 1882, (G.D), 1883, Vol.2.c, Comp.no.578, pp.i-iii, (MSA).

¹⁰⁰Letter from Surgeon-General T.Moore to the Secretary to Government, (General Department), 16 Dec.1885, (G.D), 1890, Vol.53, Comp.no.287, (MSA).

¹⁰¹From Surgeon-General to the Secretary, to the Government, (General Department), 14 Jan.1888, (G.D), 1890, Vol.53, Comp.no.287, (MSA).

Native nurses would be incapable of maintaining discipline as they do not inspire that respect which Europeans do and could not exert any authority. They cannot be relied on in matters requiring close observation and supervision and they cannot be trusted to carry out orders; and native nurses do not possess that tact which is required to overcome the prejudices to (sic) natives.¹⁰²

To this Brigadier-General Dr.Grey added that a good hospital nurse was required to have trustworthiness, patience, judgement, sense of duty and responsibility, and that:

it is precisely in the possession of these qualities that native women, and men too, are so lamentably deficient, and, so far as my experience goes, no amount of training will remedy these shortcomings. On the other hand, the qualities which native women lack are just those in which the European Sisters excel.¹⁰³

Opposition to the training of Indian women in the nursing profession was also mounted by the All Saints and Wantage Sisterhood. The sisters felt threatened by large scale replacement by Indian nurses. From 1872 onwards, they had trained sisters to work as nurses in all the hospitals of Bombay Presidency. They were insistent that the 'moral principles of native women' were 'naturally weak' and this would lead to scandals and other difficulties. They preferred to have ward-boys doing the job of nurses rather than train Indian women.¹⁰⁴ Dr. Pechey-Phipson, who conducted a pupil nurses' class at the Cama Hospital for Women, agreed to train Indian women but her scheme was so expensive that the government rejected it.¹⁰⁵

The reaction of the government to this hostility was one of surprise as it had not expected opposition from the hospitals on this issue. However, the government had no objection to placing a few sisters and European nurses as supervisors for training

¹⁰²10 Mar.1889, (G.D), 1890, Vol.53, Comp.no.3290, (MSA).

¹⁰³20 Jul.1889, (G.D), 1890, Vol.53, Comp.no.2570, (MSA).

¹⁰⁴From Sister Superior, Sr. Gladys of All Saints, to Dr.Grey, Senior Medical Officer, J.J. Hospital, 9 Jul.1889. (G.D), 1890, Vol.53, Comp.no.1089, (MSA).

¹⁰⁵Report from Dr.Edith Pechey-Phipson, First Physician, Cama Hospital, to Chief Secretary, Government of Bombay, (G.D), 1890, Vol.53, Comp.no.1088, (MSA).

Indian probationers but the income of the Lady Reay Nurses Fund could not be used for general nursing in the hospitals. It also gave an assurance that the scheme was only part of the general movement for bringing medical relief to India and it was not a scheme to replace European nurses with Indian ones. When this assurance was made, the staff of the various hospitals accepted the government proposals.

The movement for supplying medical aid and education to Indian women was a Western enterprise and was being executed by Europeans. Except for Sorabji Shapurji Bengali, no other prominent Maharashtrian social reformer was associated with it. This prevented Indians from an active involvement in the process even though they attempted to 'guide' it. The vernacular press declared unanimously that Westerners were not likely to know the inconveniences of Indian women, hence 'there ought to have been some experienced Natives on the Managing Committee of the Countess of Dufferin Fund'.¹⁰⁶ When their desire to be represented on the Committee was ignored, they were of the opinion that no subscriptions and funds from Indians could be expected unless the 'sympathy of Native leaders' was enlisted.¹⁰⁷ However, when their pleas were ignored by the various committees, they restricted themselves to critical comments on the recruitment of European women doctors and rules for the admission of female students to the Grant Medical College. They also made suggestions for midwifery courses and pleas for trained female vaccinators.

Many vernacular newspapers fanned nationalist sentiment by criticising the Dufferin Fund. The Fund had enlisted the support of the local boards and municipalities for financing the scheme. It was reported that these local bodies were being harassed in order to collect the necessary subscriptions. The greatest opposition was shown to the scheme of recruiting European women doctors, on the grounds that they were ignorant of the vernaculars and customs of the people, and preferred to have Indian male doctors giving instruction to Indian women.¹⁰⁸ ?

Arguments for segregated education were put forward by Indian men. A separate medical college to train Indian women in nursing and medicine was

¹⁰⁶Dakshin Vritt, 10 Oct.1885, (NNR).

¹⁰⁷Jame Jamshed, 5 Feb.1887, (NNR).

¹⁰⁸Subodh Patrika, 17 Feb.1883, (NNR).

advocated, staffed by women doctors from Europe. The vernacular press predicted that no Indian women would come forward for training if it meant sitting side by side with male students in Grant Medical College and that therefore the entire objective of the movement would be thwarted.¹⁰⁹

Male attitudes to women doctors are evident in their opposition to Grant Medical College's policy of treating females on a par with males. Indian men objected to women's participation in the three years' training course in the grade of 'Apothecary Class' with male students.¹¹⁰ The idea that women could be practitioners in the sense of gaining a training in drug prescription on the same level as male practitioners was repugnant to them. They were further of the opinion that women should be trained in obstetrics, paediatrics and first aid alone.¹¹¹ Women were supposed to treat only women patients. They favoured the idea of the Indian woman doctor as a 'supplement' to, rather than a 'substitute' for, the male doctor. Subodh Patrika, the mouth-piece of liberal reformers, articulated such feelings when it claimed that,

...it would be impossible to dispense with the services of the male element; the female is therefore needed to supplement and help the male in those cases where a sense of delicacy of custom interposes a bar to personal examination.¹¹²

Thus segregated spheres of work were advocated to prevent any kind of threat ensuing to the men by the movement for the medical education of Indian women.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the various processes of the movement for the higher education of women in the late nineteenth century. The establishment of the Poona High School for Girls and the creation of the Maharashtra Female Education Society

¹⁰⁹Bombay Samachar, 23 Jun.1883, (NNR).

¹¹⁰Loka Mitra, 30 Jun.1883, (NNR).

¹¹¹Mahratta, 29 Aug.1885, (NNR).

¹¹²Subodh Patrika, 10 Apr.1886, (NNR).

not only fulfilled the political aspirations of the emerging male intelligentsia to share a great measure of executive power hitherto denied them by the colonial government but it also served a more potent function. Male reformers who were unhappy with the curriculum of state-run girls' schools were able to 'guide' the course of the female education movement by assuming control over it with a large measure of success. Through segregation, checking the curriculum content and scrutinising the admission policy of the various educational schemes, they were able to ensure that women were assigned to their 'proper roles' without sacrificing their own liberal stance. This theme has been further examined in the Indian men's participation in the medical education schemes opened for women. Male opposition to women training to be doctors and pharmacists on an equal footing with men strengthens the conclusion that employment-related education for women was an undesirable goal for Maharashtrian men. It was tolerated only if it meant separate education for medical women and for the treatment of women's diseases by women: in other words a segregated education for a role to be performed out only in a segregated setting. ?

The movement for the medical aid and education of women controlled by the colonial government demonstrates how Indian women increasingly started to compete with, and hence conflict with, European medical men and women. Racial discrimination in the medical education of women and exclusion from decision-making powers in a movement that was geared towards their welfare are crucial to an understanding of the development of consciousness among Maharashtrian women on gender-related social reform issues. Thus the chapter further extends the explanation why women adopted the same male strategies of segregation in their separate institution-building programmes and why they eventually joined the nationalist struggles of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER VI

MARRIAGE REFORM

A prominent social reformer, N.G.Chandavarkar, reported the contents of a conversation between an eminent Hindu lawyer and a kunbi client of his. The lawyer asked the peasant what the latter thought of British rule. To this, the kunbi replied,

it is a very good Government indeed - we live so much in peace and security. But there is one evil to which it has led. Under former rulers, one could govern one's wife, but now the moment you beat your wife, she runs up to a magistrate.¹

This realisation of a change in gender-relations had penetrated the popular consciousness during the late nineteenth century and a wave of reaction against reform spread in Maharashtra. The critical moment of realisation was provided by the rebellious action of a Hindu wife, Rakhmabai, who defied the court's injunction to join her husband. Her defiance led to the winning over of former stalwarts of progressive opinion to the reactionary groups in Maharashtra.²

The Dadaji-versus-Rakhmabai case opened up a chasm of cultural difference for the colonial authorities and the Indian social commentator. The moment of differentiation was at the same time one of confrontation. It is argued here that the debates on marriage reforms allowed the pursuit of the imperialist ideology of affirming the Self (civilised) and the Other (barbaric) and the state found a signifier - a metaphor of 'otherness' - in the Indian 'woman' to contain the 'difference'.

In recent years cultural critics and social historians have shown the complex connections between gender categories and relations, and the structures, both discursive and institutional, of colonial power. Many of these studies focus on the

¹L.V.Kaikini (ed.), The speeches and writings of Sir Narayan G.Chandavarkar (Bombay, 1911), p.21.

²Some staunch liberals turned conservative during this agitation, like Sir T.Madhav Rau and Dr. K.R.Kirtikar, who wrote vitriolic articles condemning her action.

representational characteristics of Hindu womanhood.³ Others have seen the constructions of femininity (among colonial administrators) as weak and dependent hence needing protection, or pure and full of moral goodness, as in Gandhi's case.⁴ These different perspectives show how 'woman' operates as a sign in the colonial context, either as representing Hindu tradition or legitimating the presence of a 'masculine' imperial power through contrasting images of femininity.⁵ However, what is missing in these analyses are the perceptions and participation of women themselves. Passivity and helplessness, the major constructions in imperialist discourse of feminine qualities, were not the reasons why the Government of India took up the legislation on restitution of conjugal rights and the related questions of judicial separation but its exact opposite: namely, the resistance and defiance of legal decrees by women. While indigenous and colonial discourse quoted, illustrated and framed Indian femininity in terms of the duties of Hindu wives, women themselves also quoted, illustrated and exposed the colonial and the indigenous discourse. In other words, the oppositional discourse of the subject in creating its own identity and initiating its own desires, will be studied in this chapter.

Women and the restitution of conjugal rights debate

In 1884 Dadaji Bhikaji filed a suit for the restitution of conjugal rights in the Bombay High Court. Dadaji was married when he was twenty to Rakhmabai who was then eleven years old. The marriage had not been consummated as Rakhmabai reached puberty in her mother's home, at a much later period and by which time the marriage

³In this category are Partha Chatterjee, 'The nationalist resolution of the women's question', in K. Sangari and S. Vaid (eds.), Recasting women: Essays in colonial history (New Delhi, 1989), pp.233-53; also Lata Mani, 'Contentious traditions: The debate on Sati in colonial India', Cultural Critique, Fall 1987, pp.119-56.

⁴In the first category is the work of Ashis Nandy, The intimate enemy: Loss and recovery of Self under colonialism (New Delhi, 1983), and in the second is the work of Bhikhu Parekh, Colonialism, tradition and reform, An analysis of Gandhi's political discourse (New Delhi, 1989).

⁵Two exceptions are the studies of Geraldine Forbes and Barbara Ramusack who have studied Bengali women's voices and participation in debates over child marriage (Sarda Act, 1929). See Forbes, 'Women and modernity: The issue of child-marriage in India', Women's Studies International Quarterly, 2, 1979, pp.407-19; Barbara Ramusack, 'Women's organisations and social change: The age of marriage issue in India', N. Black and A.C. Cottrell (eds.), Women and world change: Equity issues in development (London, 1981), pp.198-216.

had broken down irrevocably. Dadaji's contention was that his wife's mother and grandfather coveted Rakhmabai's inheritance and had therefore contrived to keep the spouses apart. Rakhmabai was heiress to a modest fortune from her father, one Janardhan Pandurang, after her mother Jayantibai's re-marriage to Dr. Sakharam Arjun.⁶ Dadaji alleged that Rakhmabai was completely under the influence of her mother and grandfather.⁷ This statement was made by him despite the fact that at the time of the filing of the suit Rakhmabai was over twenty-six years old, and Dadaji had not claimed marital rights over his wife for fifteen years.

Rakhmabai claimed that it was Dadaji's inability to earn an honest livelihood, his immoral life style, his refusal to educate himself and his ill-health (he was in the intermediary stage of tuberculosis) which prevented her from joining her husband. She also explained the various occasions on which her acute aversion towards him had been formed. To quote her,

He abused my relatives including my mother in language which was shameful. He set at defiance the efforts made by my father and grandfather to educate him and took to ways which a woman's lips cannot utter. Mr. Dadajee went through every course of dissipation till my aversion for him was firmly settled. Having watched his movements for the last 5 or 6 years, I gave him up as irrevocably lost, and made up my mind to wash my hands of him for ever[sic].⁸

It is significant to note that Rakhmabai did not stress the factor of incompatibility as much as those complaints that an average traditional Hindu family would comprehend easily. She pointed out that/ even a caste panchayat would agree on the basis of textual precepts that a man had to provide for his wife in order to claim her person. An interesting shift in the male debates on Hindu tradition was the highly selective process of picking up those points of objection from Rakhmabai's

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⁶Jayantibai lost her claims to her first husband's property as the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 disallowed widows who re-married from inheriting property from their previous husbands.

⁷For the views of Dadaji see An Exposition of some of the facts of the case of Dadaji vs. Rakhmabai (Bombay, 1887), Law Tracts, pp.1-13.

⁸Rakhmabai, 'Rakhmabai's reply to Dadajee's 'Exposition'', 29 Jun. 1887, in Law Tracts, p.3.

statements which diverted the debate from the duties of a husband to that of the duties of a wife.

The case took four years for a final resolution through two legal suits, one in the original side of the High court, and the other in the Appellate courts. A third one was filed too, in the form of a defamation case, but when Dadaji felt that he would lose the case (in the first two hearings witnesses were not called, and decisions were made merely on the basis of abstract principles or legal tenets, while in the third, witnesses were called and they supported Rakhmabai's allegations) he agreed to an out-of-court settlement. The terms of this settlement were that apart from all legal costs a sum of Rs.2,000 was to be paid by her to Dadaji.⁹ The monetary resolution of the case goes a long way to explain the rationale behind suits for the restitution of conjugal rights in this century, when the social ethics allowed or even pointed to the idea that a man could re-marry as many times as he pleased.

Restructuring marriage relations was one of the prime concerns of women and this was partly due to their perception of the unhappiness of Indian wives within the system of arranged marriage. They linked the rebellion of wives within marriages to the prevalent institution of child-marriage. B.M. Malabari, a Parsi journalist and social reformer from Bombay publicised the question of child-marriage through his famous 'Notes on infant marriage and enforced widowhood' in 1884.¹⁰ But Malabari made only a fleeting reference in his 'Notes' ^{to} about unhappy unions in Indian marriages resulting from the practice of child-marriage. Further, he did not argue that the government should intervene on this ground. The replies sent to his notes were however, silent on this issue, except for Dr.R.G. Bhandarkar who insisted that there were no 'ill-assorted' marriages in India.¹¹ Many Indian men who wrote on child-marriage either ignored the question of conjugal unhappiness or denied it. Both the absence and the denial of conjugal incompatibility in Indian male discourse were

⁹Mohini Varde, Dr.Rakhmabai: A saga (Marathi), especially Chapter Nine.

¹⁰For an analysis of Dayaram Gidumal's involvement in the Age of Consent debates see Charles Heimsath, Indian nationalism and Hindu social reform, see Chapter VII.

¹¹R.G.Bhandarkar, 23 Feb.1885, Selections from Records, Government of India, Home Department, V/23/49/223, pp.133-34.

critically interwoven with the issue of restitution of conjugal rights over which the state was considering changing the law depending on 'native' consent.¹²

Between the 19th and 21st September 1885, the High Court maintained that no civilised government would force a wife against her will to live with her husband and thus declared Rakhmabai to be a free agent in refusing conjugal rights to her husband.¹³ The controversy that followed this decision in Maharashtra for the next three years revealed a wave of reaction comparable to the Age of Consent debates during 1890s in Bengal. The case of Rakhmabai touched some of the innermost concerns of the Hindu psyche, namely, who controls female sexuality? The question was whether female sexuality belonged to the woman, as Rakhmabai's later defiant stand seemed to suggest, or to the Indian male or to the ruling powers. The discursive trends within indigenous discourse, therefore, revolved round Hindu law versus British law, because the only legitimate resolution to the question could be provided as they perceived by referring to the textual injunctions on the primacy of male authority over women in India.

Following the controversial Rakhmabai versus Dadaji case, the Government of India called for an amendment of Section 260 of article 14 of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1882, in so far as its provisions related to the execution of decrees for the restitution of conjugal rights and divorce. Fourteen leading judges and civil administrators of Bombay Presidency were requested to give their opinions while no women, however prominent, were consulted on an issue that directly concerned their welfare. An analysis of the emotive response of Indian opinion towards the judicial discourse is crucial here to understand popular perceptions of marital relations in India.

Justice Pinhey had declared that Rakhmabai could not be held responsible for her marital obligations because she was a minor at the time of the marriage and the marriage had not been consummated. The vernacular Press expressed the view that consummation was not a criterion for absolving a marriage because the Hindu

¹²See the papers and proceedings on 'The proposed amendment of Section 260 of C.P.C. so far as its provisions relating to conjugal rights', in (J.D), 1888, Vol.4, Comp.no.235, (MSA).

¹³Judge Pinhey's Minute in 'Dadaji Bhikaji v. Rakhmabai' Indian Law Reports, hereafter (ILR) 9 Bom.530, 1885, pp.345-49.

marriage was a sacrament and not a contract. Besides, if Pinhey's arbitration were carried a little further, then 'ninety nine percent of Hindu marriages would be null and void'.¹⁴ Native Opinion, a popular paper and a bastion of conservative opinion under the powerful editorship of one of the most formidable legal experts of the Bombay Presidency, V.N.Mandlik, used other arguments by which it is easy to gauge the popular notions of Hindus. The view of this paper was that the decision of the court was aiming to create a revolution in the marital law of Hindus. Further, it caused anxiety in the whole Hindu community who had all along believed that their marriage relations were governed by their own ancient laws. Only cruelty, it insisted, was a justifiable ground for a wife to refuse to live with her husband, and not incompatibility. Thus, according to the newspaper, Pinhey was not interpreting the law but legislating and had subverted the principles that had governed Hindu society for ages.¹⁵

Women's views stood in stark contrast to men's in this respect. A great number of women considered ill-treatment and incompatibility as the main effects of child-marriage and as issues for redress. There was unanimity of opinion amongst women about child- and arranged-marriages creating conflict between couples. There was no genuine affection between a couple in India, wrote one woman to Arya Bhagini, because both the spouses were too young to know the meaning of love and merely accepted a mechanical imposition of the duties and obligations on themselves.¹⁶ Incompatibility was usually a result of child-marriages, wrote Girijabai Kelkar, in a compilation of essays and lectures, because of the girl's immaturity impeding her psychological growth.¹⁷ Besides, according to Girijabai, a wall of communication would be built up because her husband (who was usually considerably

¹⁴Indu Prakash, 10 Oct.1885, (NNR).

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶'Eka sushiksit stri kadun', (By an educated lady), 'Gulabbai ani Shevatibai yancha bodhpar samvad' (Instructive debates between Gulabbai and Shevatibai), Arya Bhagini (Marathi), Jun. 1891, pp.52-53, (SVGP).

¹⁷Girijabai Kelkar, 'Tarunpidhi va samajik sudharana' (The younger generation and social reform), in Grihini Bhushan, Bhag doosra, Pushpahar (Guide-books for women, Part Two, A garland of flowers) pp.72-84.

older) could not convince her rationally about anything that he considered important.

If a union of minds was unlikely, what was the solution to this issue? Instead of child-marriage women showed a strong preference for adult marriages and choice in marriage rather than arranged marriages. Since they attributed domestic strife to the unhappiness and discontent of young wives, they came up with the radical suggestion that choosing a spouse should not only be the male child's prerogative but a female child should also be consulted.¹⁸ This was the main reason why a revival of swayamvar (the ceremony, supposed to have existed in the Vedic times, by which a woman chose her spouse in an open competition between male suitors) was enthusiastically called for, rather than a blind imitation of the 'golden age'.

In the absence of divorce women reasoned that if wives deserted their husbands, or committed suicide or homicide, there were many extenuating reasons for their actions. As seen in Chapter Four, in the absence of divorce wives sometimes poisoned their husbands. Women cited the system of arranged and child-marriages, along with the ill-treatment of wives by husbands or/and in-laws, as causes of conjugal incompatibility. Even though women hesitated with good reason to be explicit in their writing about the subject of divorce, yet there were many who divorced which is discussed later on in this chapter. Rakhmabai, in contrast to Malabari's proposals, recommended divorce as the primary means of resolving domestic tensions within a marriage which had broken down irrevocably.¹⁹

Resistance by wives to an oppressive atmosphere in the home of the husband forms a substantial part of the civil and criminal cases of the colonial courts in the nineteenth century. There are a great many instances when the Court of Small Causes fined a father-in-law or a husband for inflicting grievous bodily harm on the person of the wife or daughter-in-law. The most common form of chastisement were branding and cutting off the tip of the nose.²⁰ The reason attributed for such brutalities were the rebellious nature of women. Mahipatram Rupram, gave graphic details of how a

¹⁸'By an educated lady', 'Instructive debates between Gulabbai and Shevatibai', Arya Bhagini pp.52-53, (SVGP).

¹⁹Rakhmabai's letter entitled 'Infant marriage and enforced widowhood', Times of India, p.4.

²⁰See Chapter Four.

recalcitrant wife was dealt with in Western India. To quote him:

... we sometimes see in the mofussil towns and villages a husband seizing his reluctant wife in a public street by her hair or hand, and dragging her to his house amidst the admiration of his spectators.²¹

Thus, Hindus acted on the belief that the husband was authorised to exact obedience from the wife through personal chastisement.

Suicide and homicide (poisoning the husband or co-wife) were some of the most common means of ending a marriage, but proved to be more a source of misery than of happiness. Such forms of resistance were taken due to ill-treatment and neglect by husbands or relatives. Newspapers often reported the death of women by suicide due to quarrels with their husbands, or due to their extreme ill-treatment.²² British magistrates confirmed the resistance put up by child-wives when they poisoned their husbands after the latter had successfully claimed a decree for restitution of conjugal rights.²³

Pandita Ramabai added adultery both by men and women to the list of crimes resulting from the Indian style of marriage. She expressed the opinion that many virtuous wives committed suicide because they could not win the affection of wayward men, and many women found love in extra-marital affairs due to the neglect of their spouses resulting in uxoricide. She did not hold either of them responsible for their acts but considered this situation to be a result of the marriage system which denied choice in marriage and dissolution of marriage when conjugal relations broke down

²¹A confidential reply by Rao Bahadur Mahipatram Rupram, To A. Shewan, Acting Under-Secretary to Government, (Judicial Department), 6 Aug. 1887; in 'The proposed amendment of section 260 of Civil Procedure Code so far as its provisions relating to conjugal rights', (hereafter 'Proposed amendment'), (J.D), 1888, Vol.4, Comp.No.235, (MSA).

²²For example, on 30 Jun. 1885, Times of India reported that Vithee, aged nineteen years, wife of a labourer, committed suicide. A post-mortem revealed death due to opium poisoning and the reason given was 'quarrels with husband'. Two days later, the same paper reported the suicide of Munjoobai, a fifteen year old wife of a dock labourer. The same means were cited as well as the same reason for suicide.

²³Letter by J.W. Walker, 6 Sept. 1887, 'Proposed amendment', (J.D), 1888, (MSA).

irretrievably.²⁴

Both official and Indian discourse held that the provisions of the law regarding the restitution of conjugal rights enforced so far were very rare. And, in a bid to oppose radical change in the status of the wife, it decreed that, the cases so far, did not constitute sufficient justification for a change in the law. Therefore, by implication there were no unhappy unions in marriages, no misery caused to women through ill treatment by husbands and hence no need for changes in the law. The following sections will concentrate on showing how women acted as agents in resolving their dilemmas within unhappy marriages.

In the nineteenth century most ill-treated and abandoned wives who were fortunate enough to have the sympathy and support of parents or the extended family, sought the intervention of the civil courts for resolution of marital disputes. Since divorce was disallowed under the British construction of Hindu law, women sought the dissolution of their marriages on technical points of law.

A suit, for example, by a Hindu mother, as the guardian of her infant daughter, for a declaration that the alleged marriage of the daughter with the defendant was null and void, was held to be a suit of a civil nature and was adjudicated upon.²⁵ Likewise, there are reported cases which sought to set aside marriages which had already taken place on various grounds - (a) because the bride had been given away by her mother and not her father, or by her step mother when her paternal grandmother was alive, (b) because she had been married to a person belonging to a different caste or that her husband had married a second wife and had previously agreed that on such marriage the first marriage should be considered dissolved.²⁶ Among non-Brahmins, wives sought divorce although due to the operation of the colonial re-interpretation of Hindu law it was becoming increasingly difficult for

²⁴Pandita Ramabai, Stri-Dharma niti (Prescribed laws and duties on the proper conduct of women (Marathi), (Kedgaon, 1967), p.70.

²⁵See the letter of Dayaram Gidumal, Acting Assistant Judge, Ahmedabad, to the Secretary to Government, (Judicial Department), 15 Sept. 1887, 'Proposed amendment', (J.D), 1888, (MSA).

²⁶Ibid., p.173.

women to act on their own free-will.²⁷

If we judge by statistics alone, (see Table 1 below) the cases which came annually before the civil courts in Bombay Presidency (including subordinate, district and high courts) 727 suits were for enforcement of decrees for restitution of conjugal rights and 81 for dissolution of marriages. The latter were usually between Christian husbands and wives but the former involved Hindus and Muslims. Not all of these suits were by deserted wives seeking the company of their husbands but many were by guardians and parents and one may presume they came up in the technical way described in the previous paragraph. *Notes?*

TABLE 1

Numbers of Civil Suits for Enforcement of Marriage Contracts and the Dissolution of Marriages in Bombay Presidency (1881-85).

Year	Subordinate Judge' Courts		District Courts		High Court	
	Enforce ment	Dissoluti on	Enforce ment	Dissolutio n	Enforce ment	Dissolutio n
1881	120	4	11	4	2	8
1882	123	6	12	1	3	2
1883	106	5	29	4	4	8
1884	135	10	10	4	2	6
1885	155	12	12	5	3	2
Total	639	37	74	18	14	26

Source: Letter from Rao Bahadur Mahadeo Govind Ranade, Poona to the Chief Secretary to Government, Bombay, 19 Sept. 1887, (Judicial Department), 1888 (Acts), Vol.4, Comp. No. 235, (MSA).

²⁷See Chapters Three and Four for details.

One may be led to think that these cases are not large enough to make a generalisation for women's agency. However, remedy through civil courts was not a popular method sought by the population, especially for women who had very few resources or did not know that Act XV of 1877, schedule II, provided an option for an unwilling wife of preferring six months' imprisonment in a civil jail to the acquiescing in the conjugal rights of her husband. Mahipatram Rupram, a district judge, recorded that vakils (pleaders) never provided this vital information to female clients, forfeiting at least one source of income.²⁸ Indian lawyers were anxious to restrict the knowledge to female clients at the expense of denying themselves additional income. This reference illustrates quite brilliantly how Indian men feared independent action on the part of women and desired to continue the status quo. In this instance lawyers reinstated patriarchy in a society where traditional power networks (caste-council arbitration) was being uprooted in favour of the colonial courts and the indigenous male population had to accommodate these changes in the best possible manner.²⁹

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Besides the fact that women were denied information about civil courts, many female clients preferred the law administered by criminal courts as it was less expensive and more effective. Wives were also aware of the fact that even if they applied for restitution of conjugal rights and won the case the courts could not enforce their decree.³⁰ Both Mahipatram and M.G.Ranade pointed out that even illiterate women had access to the knowledge that they could obtain payments as alimony from their husbands by applying to a Magistrate and many such applications were successfully made.

Between 1881 and 1885 (see Table 2 below) a total of 2,874 wives brought

²⁸Mahipatram Rupram in his letter 6 Aug. 1887, 'Proposed amendment', (J.D), 1888.

²⁹Mahipatram Rupram further shows how it was only with the wide publicity of the Dadaji-v-Rakhmabai case in the vernacular newspapers that informed the mofussil public for the first time that a wife actually had a choice in the matter of choosing imprisonment to the company of her husband, Ibid.

³⁰Through the practice of polygamy a husband could always defy the court orders in an informal way by taking new wives and ignoring or maltreating the previous wife through physical violence. See the reply of Tirmal Rao Venkatesh Inamdar, retired Judge, Court of small causes, Dharwar, 14 Aug. 1887, 'Proposed amendment', (J.D), 1888.

b/ cases before the criminal courts of Bombay Presidency against their husbands, and redress was demanded through payment of maintenance on grounds of ill-treatment. Not all of them were brought by adult wives; a few were lodged by the parents of neglected child-wives. M.G. Ranade, a seasoned legal expert and the compiler of these statistics, wrote that 'the large majority of the cases under chapter thirty-six are undoubtedly due to the neglect of marital duties by husbands towards their wives'.³¹

TABLE 2

Maintenance Suits filed in Criminal Courts in Bombay Presidency (1881-85).

Year	Persons Accused	Persons Convicted	Persons Acquitted
1881	423	314	109
1882	447	332	115
1883	462	359	103
1884	735	382	352
1885	807	389	418
Total	2874	1776	1097

* Source: As for Table 1.

Altogether, if one includes both civil and criminal cases, at least a thousand cases came up annually. This is a startling proof that resistance by women was not absent but arose out of a system of marriage which perpetuated maladjusted conjugal unions and so gave rise to rebellion by oppressed wives.

³¹Reply by Rao Bahadur Mahadev Govind Ranade, to The Chief Secretary to Government, 19 Sept. 1887, 'Proposed amendment', (J.D), 1888.

The state and Indian men on female sexuality

At critical junctures in its history, every society dives into its past and recalls certain 'traditions' whether illusory or real. The Rakhmabai case was one such historical moment when Indian men recalled the ancient past while women remembered a more immediate past constructed through the accumulated experiences of present-day women. Through a selective act of remembrance men unfolded the supposed duties of women, their frailty and the weak nature of female fidelity, the inherent irrationality of women, which lead to their rebellion. They did so in order to prove the primacy of the shastras (ancient scriptures) in vesting male authority over female sexuality in India. as well as ?

The past reconstructed by some of the liberal reformers in their replies to the government regarding the necessity of amending the law relating to execution of decrees and divorce hinged on the duties of the wife to the family and the state. References and quotations from the texts of Manu, Acharkhand, Panini and Mitakshara were regularly used in a selective manner, unwrapping as it were the obligations and duties of a woman as a wife to her husband. We can best illustrate this through a few samples of popular perceptions. One reader from Madras wrote a letter to the Times of India immediately after Rakhmabai published her letters appreciating her boldness but also criticising her irresponsible and insolent behaviour.

He wrote telling her that she was under a great misapprehension about the options open to a woman. According him the shastras identified only four classes of women.³² In the first were those who were intensely devoted to God, the second were those who were intensely devoted to husbands, and the third were those equally divided between devotion to God and devotion to husband, and last were those who were devoted to their husbands as though they were incarnations of God. Of these, only the first could relegate their responsibility to the husband, while the second category committed sati (widow-burning) and the third re-married after the death of the first but lived intensely for a second husband as though the first had never died, and the last led an exemplary life of chastity after the death of the first. 'There are no other possibilities for women in Hindu life other than these four', and Rakhmabai, he

³²In Varde, The saga of Dr. Rakhmabai (Marathi), p.42.

pointed out, belonged to none of these categories which meant that she was transgressing ancient laws.³³

On the other hand, a prominent leader of the movement for higher education of women and one of the founders of the Poona High School for Girls, S.P. Pandit, argued on the basis of popular opinion. According to him, although Hindu law did not prescribe imprisonment for a recalcitrant wife and the Code which empowered the court to do so was an importation of the English canonical laws, both uneducated and educated contemporary opinion, as revealed in the discussions of the Press, had given their approval to this importation.³⁴ The Hindu population, he argued, approved heartily of the imprisonment clause, showing they felt no repugnance at this importation even though foreign to Hindu law. Imprisonment, he agreed was a punishment which a rebellious wife deserved and 'the orthodox public considers the law about the imprisonment as a very valuable warning to wives.'³⁵ Female sexuality and its regulation was, according to him, a matter for men alone to decide.

The same argument was sketched out more sharply by others like Narayan Shastri Gokhale who showed by textual references that women were not granted autonomy by Hindu laws therefore how could they be vested with decision-making powers? The kanyadan (giving away of the virgin-bride) ceremony, an essential ritual during a marriage, he insisted, represented:

the doing away of one's ownership in a thing and then creating therein the ownership of another, and thus is created the ownership of the receiving party in the girl that is given just as in the case of the cow etc.,...³⁶

Therefore, there was no question of a wife being an agent in the matter of marriage. This learned priest argued that if women were not granted an essential freedom it was because of their fickle nature which led them to quarrel on the slightest pretext and

³³Ibid.

³⁴Shankar P. Pandit, 22 Sept.1887, 'Proposed amendment', (J.D), 1888.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Narayan Shastri Gokhale, 16 Aug.1887, Ibid.

leave their husbands for other men. Further, he added, the functioning of the state was adversely effected because men would not be able to carry out their duties effectively if women were not 'properly controlled', and the only means of controlling them was by 'bodily chastisement'.³⁷ The state, he warned, would be the loser if it abolished imprisonment for the execution of the decree for the enforcement of restitution of conjugal rights.

In the delineation of sex roles the most popular one recalled from the past was the woman's place at home and the complete merging of her personality into that of her husband. Thus 'obedience' was considered the prime duty of a woman. The first hearing of and decision on Rakhmabai's case which had upheld her rights was interpreted as upholding a woman's disobedient act, a defiance of her supreme Lord and master - her husband. Another strand in the argument of men concentrated on showing that Rakhmabai was attempting to universalise her own problem as being the problem of Indian wives generally. On the contrary, men argued that the problem of widowhood was only confined to the high-caste Brahmin society. While labouring class women, they alleged, were creating havoc in the domestic life of the countryside by constantly appealing to courts for maintenance or damages from husbands on what men considered as frivolous grounds.³⁸ Newspapers thus dwelled on how the British laws were subverting Hindu tradition by giving a 'premium to disobedient wives'.

It was B.G.Tilak's agitation on behalf of the traditionalist school which pressured the Government to re-hear the case. Rakhmabai's struggle was one of the earliest reform issues which he used to attack the reformist school led by Ranade. The crux of his arguments was that the whole case had been judged on wrong legal premises besides the fact that it was indefensible on political and moral grounds. He argued that autonomy was a non-existent concept in ancient Hindu law. A woman's consent was not necessary for a marriage to be validated as long as the rituals had taken place. Therefore, to rule that Rakhmabai was now a free woman on the basis

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸An editorial expressed anger at women demanding redress through courts by citing cases wherein women had successfully won damages for ill treatment or in an interesting case where a wife dissolved the marriage and secured a maintenance of two hundred and twenty rupees as her husband was suffering from leprosy. Bombay Gazette, cited in Varde, The saga of Dr.Rakhmabai (Marathi), p.43.

that she had been married as a minor, without her assent, meant that no child marriage was valid any more.³⁹ His arguments appealed not only to conservatives but to liberals as well. In responses to the Government's call for amending conjugal rights, more than half replied that imprisonment had to be retained as a chastising method as women had no property for attachment, and, except for Ranade, everyone who was called on to give an opinion on the introduction of divorce vetoed the suggestion.

Thus it is not difficult to understand why his arguments had such a great appeal. They converged with the government's views, too, as seen in Justice Farran's decision in the Appeal Court where the first judgement on Rakhmabai's case was entirely reversed. In his Minute, he ruled that since Rakhmabai had been married in a ritual consensual to Hindu marriages, her defiant action meant 'a great contempt of the Hindu law'.⁴⁰ Farran's decision had evolved out of the judicial discourse on the amendment of procedural law governing conjugal rights. Here the views of Justice West can be studied in detail because he wrote a sixty page treatise on this very issue. And his treatise proved to be the most authoritative to which all other judges consulted in the proposed Amendment of the Act ended their own Minutes agreeing heartily with West's scholarly work.⁴¹

A powerful argument was built up by Raymond West on the whole issue of restitution of conjugal rights with the final idea of non-interference at the cost of the female's right of agency. He began his treatise by comparing and contrasting 'Christian societies' (referring to England) and 'Hindu society' (India). According to him, a marriage system wherein the father chose a husband for the daughter was not peculiar to Hindu society but had existed in pre-Christian European societies. He argued that in the period when women exerted choice in marriage, it led to universal licentiousness. Thus if sanctions and procedures in restitution of conjugal rights are changed to accommodate the female's freewill, the less civilised Hindu society would turn chaotic and prove to be a law and order problem, because the Hindu religious laws which controlled the chastity of a woman would be removed and universal

³⁹B.G.Tilak, Kesari (Marathi), 4 Oct. 1884.

⁴⁰Justice Farran's judgement in Dadaji.v.Rakhmabai, reported in Times of India, 4 Mar.1887.

⁴¹Minute by Justice Raymond West, 5 Aug.1887, 'Proposed amendment', (J.D), 1888.

licentiousness would prevail. Only Christian societies, he insisted, were so highly civilised that in spite of the supposed freewill of women spiritual values checked women from immorality. Here the judicial discourse concurs with the indigenous discourse that women rebelled within a marriage not because of oppression or injustice but to let their physical instincts free.

Further, he referred to the texts on Hindu law to show that in the less-civilised India a woman actually did become a part of the husband's sub-caste as she left her father's gotra on her marriage. Therefore, if the husband showed 'sustenance and kindness', the wife showed 'subordination and obedience', the regulation of duties could then be 'in a great and useful measure defined and enforced by the State'.⁴² Besides upholding the patriarchal Indian society the judicial discourse successfully usurped political functions and effectively became repressive by unfolding the concept of 'duty' as opposed to 'rights'. The duties of a woman were towards the man and the man's towards society and the society's towards the state.

The judicial discourse did take into consideration the customary laws which allowed for kadimod (separation) and ghatasphot (divorce). However, no British legal expert was in favour of giving them importance as it conflicted directly with the ever-widening grip of the court authority over civil society and the existent tug of war with the caste-panchayat authority. Referring to customary laws he said:

they cannot be extensively replaced without great risk of a disintegration of the indigenous family system and of the whole scheme of society that rests upon it.⁴³

The judiciary was thus to him one which stood for an 'ordered society' as opposed to 'social chaos'. Thus the traditional sources of agency wherein a woman could seek redress were also being slowly eroded by the powerful judicial mechanisms of the ruling state.

One strand of the judicial discourse which is common to indigenous male opinion was the injurious construction of the 'wild and passionate' nature of the lower class females of India. There was a popular misconception about how lower class

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

males bought wives for a certain price and if such women were not strictly governed by legal controls, the latter would neglect their husbands to be indulgent to lovers. Therefore, it was important, as West argued, 'to protect the marital rights of a labouring man who needs the services of his wife', so that he could function better and participate fully in the economy.⁴⁴ By upsetting their marriage structure not only would licentiousness become endemic but crimes of violence would result wherein the rural masses would take coercive means into their own hands rather than go to courts.

Any system of marriage whether sacred or contract, he asserted, could operate harshly on individual women 'but the good, the very existence of society demand it'.⁴⁵ Women, he felt, could gain immensely from the institution of marriage as long as they obeyed their 'feminine instincts' and did not breach any recognised social relations and jeopardise gender relations. Therefore the state was only guarding 'social integrity'.

Finally, the judicial discourse strengthened the orientalist notions of a submissive Indian wife. Justice West, for example, ignored the reality he saw everyday in the courts when he romanticised the feelings of Indian womanhood on marital relations. To him, an Indian woman:

looks on herself as created and given by the Gods to be the completion of her husband's life, and never for a moment questions the divine ordinance... a Hindu woman would look on it as a kind of sacrilege to claim equality with her husband.⁴⁶

The image of a self-effacing and self-abnegating woman who was ready to respond to every call of her husband, however offensive, carried in its implications the sign of a woman who could never want to be an agent. She was a subject without volition.

West qualified this statement by adding that Western notions and education could probably train a Hindu girl:

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

to a higher sense of her own rights and capacities, but she cannot sincerely embrace this creed of freedom, equality, and wedlock of souls and at the same time remain sincerely a Hindu.⁴⁷

Besides the major implications of a Hindu being a non-autonomous person, the judicial discourse on female sexuality in common with the indigenous opinion trapped the Hindu woman in a textual representation of what a Hindu woman ought to be rather than what she was.

Feminists of this period were aware of this romanticisation of Indian womanhood and drew the attention of the society to it often and sometimes sharply. The Subodh Patrika had reported the views of the famous Indologist Max Mueller on the issue of child marriage wherein he had idealised Indian marriages. Max Mueller was reported to have said that love and affection was generated in infant marriage through the sheer act of the child-spouses growing up in the same home and thus implying that harmony and union of ideas were present in arranged marriages too. The women's magazine Arya Bhagini criticised him for his lack of first-hand experiences of India and his reliance on the textual knowledge of the East. Shewatibai tells her friend that,

Max Mueller saheb is going to live abroad forever. He has no first hand knowledge of the domestic life of an average Indian nor of the behaviour and conduct of our men. Therefore the statements made by Saheb is not applicable uniformly to everyone of us. Among child-marriage cases only around 4-5 couples out of hundred live in a state of mutual love and harmony. And around 90 couples do not experience this state of love and affection instead there is constant bickering and quarrelling in the home.⁴⁸

According to women held the view that domestic unrest and unhappy conjugal unions in Indian homes led women to rebel. Women called for reconstituting conjugal relations but the dominant discourses erased their voices from the mainstream

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸'By an educated lady', 'Instructive debates', Arya Bhagini, Sept. 1891, pp.78-79.

deliberations on the restitution of conjugal rights and divorce. However, in the case of the Age of Consent debates women were able to impress their views more effectively and we shall turn to this issue next.

Women's views on the institutions of marriage and family

Rakhmabai published a series of letters in the Times of India on the subjects of infant marriage and enforced widowhood under the pseudonym of 'The Hindu lady' between June and September 1885. Initially she was hesitant to use her own name as it might have adverse repercussions on the bhaginivarg (sisterhood) but in 1887 she revealed her identity as men spread rumours that 'The Hindu lady' was actually a man whose writings need not be taken seriously.⁴⁹ Her letters started a major debate among many sections of Indian society which lasted till the end of the year 1885, and included the women's press too.

Among the indigenous elites, one of the first persons to address marriage reforms was Behramji Malabari, credited for uniting reformers from all provinces through the Age of Consent Bill. Rakhmabai had followed the progress of his propagandist notes and the reaction to it which prompted her to express her own views on the subject. While acknowledging the gratitude of Indian women ~~on~~ ^{for} his exertions, she constructed a gendered critique for the abolition of child-marriage startlingly different from that of Malabari.

At the time of the publication of her letters, Dadaji's case for the restitution of conjugal rights over her was being heard in the Bombay high court. The decision of the court in fact came three weeks after the publication of her second letter on 'Enforced Widowhood'. To quote her,

I am one of those unfortunate Hindu women, whose hard lot it is to suffer the unnameable miseries entailed by the custom of early marriage. This wicked practice has destroyed the happiness of my life.⁵⁰

⁴⁹In 'Rakhmabai's reply to Dadajee's 'Exposition'', pp.9-10.

⁵⁰Rakhmabai, 'Infant marriage', Times of India, 26 Jun.1885, p.4.

However, the observations she made were drawn from the lives of her female friends thus formulating general theoretical propositions based on the cumulative experiences of women. Rakhmabai, along with her mother Jayantibai, was a regular attender at the Prarthana Samaj and the Arya Mahila Samaj founded by Pandita Ramabai in 1882.⁵¹ It may be presumed that she had ample scope to observe and relate ^{to} with women of a fairly developed consciousness on women's rights. She stated that the institution of child-marriage cut across caste and class considerations and adversely affected all age and sex groups but 'women' she concluded, were its 'greatest victims'.⁵² Infant marriage, according to her was a persistent obstacle to the psychological development of the female sex, stultifying ^{men} (her) personality by the denial of higher education. The structure of Indian marital relationships, she claimed, cramped the free expression of women, thus robbing them of any initiative.

The analysis of marital relations as they affected women ^{by} Rakhmabai was shared generally by Maharashtrian women of the time. A consideration of women's perspectives on this important question reveals that humanitarian and feminist concerns motivated women to agitate against the custom of child marriage. The unhappiness and terror of a child-wife, the strain in conjugal relations leading to suicides by wives, the death of women in their prime due to early motherhood and widowhood were seen as vicious consequences of early marriage.

The issue of child marriage was considered to be a vital link to the deplorable condition of Indian women. The anxiety and tension of a child-wife were experienced by a majority of women. Therefore solutions were sought eagerly in order to ease the entry of a young girl in the new and unfamiliar surroundings of her husband's house was a preoccupation of educated women. Physical and mental immaturity of the child-wife ^{wife} was considered as a major cause of mal-adjustment in the home of the in-laws. Most women agreed that no girl below the age of 15 should be given in marriage in order to see that she understood properly the institution of marriage as well as what

⁵¹For details on Rakhmabai's childhood and education see Chapter I and II of Varde, The saga of Dr. Rakhmabai (Marathi).

⁵²Ibid., p.4

was expected of her in the new environment of her in-laws.⁵³

A rebellious child-wife usually faced a great deal of hardship in her in-laws' house, and this sometimes drove her to commit suicide. Kanthabai Tarkhadkar gives a graphic description of how a young girl forced into early marriage does not show malleability in moulding herself to the discipline in her husband's house. According to her:

A young girl blossoms in the warmth of her parent's home. She glows in the loving company of her sisters and brothers. She is as ⁶illuminous and quick as a streak of lightning. Even in her dreams she has not a clue to the notion of a husband or in-law. Alas! The days of fun and frolic draw to a close when she reaches maturity. She is suddenly transported to the karagriha (prison) called married life and then her condition is so pathetic that describing it would be beyond even the abilities of the Goddess of Learning. How can one expect her to love an unknown man as her husband and respect elderly members of his household? How can she understand how to behave with her sisters-in-law who prey on her constantly like tigresses? In such a situation, she is often referred to as evil, obstinate, uncaring, arrogant and insolent and soon she becomes a subject of abuse. That is why, even though alive she is as good as dead, for the benefit of one's own society and country. Surely ninety percent of women are facing this sort of situation.⁵⁴

The sudden displacement of a young girl from her nurturing environment to one where she is expected to nurture led to psychological and emotional problems of adjustment and finally to her abuse by her husband's family which was recognised by women as a consequence of child-marriage.

Women not only recognised the problems of a child-wife as arising from child marriage but also from the lack of support from their husbands. They realised that child-wives were often married to child-husbands who were too young to fully comprehend the oppression and alienation of their wives in the hands of his family

⁵³Anandibai Lad, 'Lavkar lagna karnyache chal' (The custom of early marriage), Arya Bhagini (Marathi), Mar. 1886, pp.3-6; Kanthabai Tarkhadkar, 'Striyanchi sthiti' (The condition of women), Arya Bhagini (Marathi), Apr. 1892, pp.26-29.

⁵⁴Kanthabai, ibid., p.26.

members or to exercise any real authority in the home in order to prevent the ill-treatment of their wives. The only way, it was felt, to remedy the situation was to ban child marriages so that men would also be forced to continue their education in an uninterrupted manner and marry only at an age when they were old enough to look after the welfare of their wives independent of the clutches of their elders.⁵⁵ The fact of helplessness among younger males caused by financial dependence and hierarchical forms of control in a tightly structured patriarchal form of organisation was also taken into account.

A prominent Marathi journal, Masik Manoranjan, interviewed various prominent women activists of Maharashtra who had participated in the Age of Consent agitation. It is worthwhile discussing the views of Kashibai Kanitkar, an important member of the Arya Mahila Samaj, who said that ninety-nine percent of marriages were unhappy, but the measure of unhappiness could be considerably reduced by raising the Age of Consent. If human beings were married at a very young age they would later on rise and say, 'I was deceived, I was cheated...', and rebel by moving out of the marital bond.⁵⁶ No girl should be below fourteen and no boy below twenty at the time of marriage, she argued. Also, both the sexes should have freedom to choose their partners so that if the marriage broke down, 'they will not point fingers at others but at themselves'.⁵⁷ That responsibility in such a vital issue should be shouldered by adults alone rather than children was Kashibai's main concern.

Women identified child-marriage as a major cause of mortality among mothers and children. They quoted examples of how early child-bearing by physically immature girls could lead to post-natal deaths and weaken the resistance of women making them prone to diseases as well as the birth of rickety and mentally retarded children.⁵⁸ Not only did this cause immense suffering to women but a progressively

⁵⁵Ibid., p.27.

⁵⁶Cited in Sarojini Vaidya, Shrimati Kashibai Kanitkar: atmacharitra ani charitra (Mrs.Kashibai Kanitkar, Autobiography and biography) (Marathi), (Bombay, 1979), p.231.

⁵⁷Ibid., pp.231-32.

⁵⁸Tarabai Nabar, 'Bal vivahache dushparinam' (The evil effects of child-marriage), Maharashtra Mahila (Marathi), May 1901, pp.234-36; See also Editorial, 'Social reform', Arya Bhagini (Marathi), Jun.1891, pp.49-52.

sick and unhealthy progeny was leading to an unhealthy race as was pointed out by women as a plea for passing the Age of Consent Act. Women tagged eugenic arguments onto feminist and nationalist concerns. That a sick and weak Indian race could never combat the force of a foreign power was effectively tied with feminist concerns at the abuse of the female body at a very tender age. In this sense, even though the arguments of Maharashtrian women were borrowed from the popular pseudo-scientific racial theories of mid-nineteenth century, their significance as well as difference lies in their synthesis of humanist and feminist considerations.

One of the most significant areas of self-assertion among Maharashtrian women was their efforts to elevate the status of a wife over that of a mother within the joint family. Almost all writings of women reveal a great deal of sympathy for a woman who became a wife. Tarabai Shinde was of the opinion that a wife loved and cared for a husband much more than her own life yet her position within the Hindu family was pitiable.⁵⁹ Kanthabai Tarkhadkar wrote that:

a child-wife builds up a tolerance and resistance to suffer all kinds of indignities from the in-laws and the only reason why she survives is the presence of her husband from whom she steals an occasional glance of affection ...⁶⁰

In the unfamiliar and often hostile environment of the in-laws' home, they reasoned, it was natural for the child-wife to seek refuge in the husband. However, it is clear from the writings of women during this time that many wives were unable to secure the love of their husbands and there are many cases of wife-beating by husbands at the instance of their mothers, elderly aunts or sisters. The lack of conjugal felicity and love between a couple was considered by women as a direct result of the Indian institution of marriage. The prevailing system of arranged marriages without heed to the preference of the boy or the girl, the act of demanding dowry and the young age of the couple were considered as the principal reasons for marital

⁵⁹Tarabai Shinde, Stripurushtulana athava striya va purush vant sahasi kon he spasta karun dakavinyakarita ha nibandh; (Comparison of woman and man or an essay showing who is more wicked (Marathi), (Bombay, 1975), 1st ed., 1882, p.6.

⁶⁰Kanthabai, 'The condition of women', Arya Bhagini (Marathi), Apr. 1892, p.28.

disharmony finally leading to the misery of wives.

Stress in conjugal relations was thus traced to child-marriage. Women felt that mutual love and affection was very difficult to cultivate in such an externally imposed contract as that of an arranged marriage. The chances of a learned man being married to a woman who was not interested in sharing his intellectual pursuits or that of a girl keen on pursuing her higher studies/^{? who} could be stopped halfway due to early marriage or ~~due to~~ the whims of her husband were equally high. Either way, that such marriages resulted in bitterness was recognised by women. This was amply proved by the case of Rakhmabai who was married to a man who shared no common interests with her, ~~but~~ the fact of their betrothal having taken place in childhood was enough to wreck their lives. Women recognised that ~~whenever~~[?] such a mismatch occurred a woman bore it silently as no options were offered to her, while a disgruntled husband sought such compatibility outside either through re-marriage or through a recourse to mistresses or prostitutes.

Another argument against early marriage was the utter neglect of a girl's education after her marriage. According to feminists of the time, widening of the girl's horizons of knowledge and developing her own self through a sound school education would have helped her to comprehend marriage better. As Tarabai put it:

Due to the responsibility of looking after a home, she cant educate herself and her entire life passes by in utter ignorance and darkness. Because of her illiteracy she does not know either household management or how to conduct marital relations. There will be a wedge in their relationship if the husband is considerably older than her. If he is unable to secure a loving companionship and care from her, he will go to mistresses and ruination of the man follows while the helpless wife is thrown into a well of misery. Child-marriage has all these negative accompaniments.⁶¹

What worried women about child marriage was that a woman lost in two vital ways, one was the opportunity to help her self-development as well as due to her ignorance of the nature of the conjugal relationship she could not participate fully in

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⁶¹Tarabai Nabar, 'The evil effects of child-marriage', Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), May 1901, p.235.

her role as a wife.

One of the most important reasons for attacking the institution of child-marriage was its obvious link to early widowhood. The terrible changes that a woman underwent as a widow were known to every woman and described by them. It is interesting to note that women acknowledged and accepted the physical needs of the female sex. The parents of female children were constantly asked whether they preferred continuing the custom of child marriage or live with the loss of their reputation. Since a child wife faced the prospect of widowhood, the chances of her being involved in clandestine relations was higher and likely to lead to crimes of infanticide and a fall in the social status of the family.⁶² Instead of harping on the control of a widow's sexuality, they addressed themselves to the practical question of the causes of widowhood and traced it to child marriage. In demanding the abolition of child-marriage, Maharashtrian women were in the forefront, after the passing of the Age of Consent Act, and many of them pressed native states like Baroda to pass the Act. One of the main reasons they quoted was to lessen the number of child-widows.⁶³

Resentment and anger at the unjust conjugal relations mark the writings of women on the subject of child-marriage. If we turn towards the male discourse on the Age of Consent, a totally different picture emerges. In the 'Notes', circulated and published by Malabari, he constructed a powerful picture of an Indian society, ravaged by incapable adults, sickly children, over-population and poverty leading to widespread diseases. The consequences of child-marriage, to quote him, were:

the breaking down of constitutions and the ushering of disease. The giving up of studies on the part of the boy-husband, the birth of sickly children, the necessity of feeding too many mouths, poverty and dependence...⁶⁴

⁶²Kanthabai, 'The condition of women', Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), p.28.

⁶³Editorial, Maharashtra Mahila, (Marathi), Jun.1901, pp.243-44.

⁶⁴Behramji M. Malabari, Notes on infant-marriage and enforced widowhood, In Selections from the records, Government of India, Home Department, V\23\49\223, p.3, (IOL).

The state, he insisted, had to take up the question on purely economic grounds of 'over-population in poverty'.⁶⁵ In the late nineteenth century race improvement and public health were powerful strands of knowledge in the discourse of indigenous sections in their attempts to bring reforms of cultural practices.⁶⁶ M.G.Ranade, a stalwart of this period argued mainly for legislation on the grounds of checking the reproduction of a weak race and economic ruin of the country. He argued that early marriage led to early consummation, and thus to:

... the physical deterioration of the race, that it sits as a heavy weight on our rising generation, enchains their aspirations, denies them the romance and freedom of youth, cools their love of study, checks enterprise, and generally dwarfs their growth, and fills the country with pauperism, bred of over-population by weaklings and sickly people, and lastly, that it leads in many cases to all the horrors of early widowhood.⁶⁷

The essential virtue of self-help amongst Indians, he insisted, would never come due to their bondage with the past and hence ^{he} pleaded for state interference. What is of significance to the discussion here is the singular absence of a gendered critique for the raising of the Age of Consent. It could be argued that elites of progressive opinion used the medical and health evidence as a tactical move in order to manoeuvre the state in overcoming their promise of non-interference, however, opinions expressed by liberals on other vital questions of women's education ^{also} used eugenic arguments. Dr. K.R.Kirtikar, for example, as the President of the Pathare Prabhu Reform Society, and a Surgeon at Grant Medical College, argued in many lectures that the only reason why a woman was entitled to education was because she was the 'Mother of the Indian

⁶⁵Ibid., pp.3-4.

⁶⁶Martina Michel has recently studied the management of the nation's 'health' as an integral part of the state discourse on child-marriage debates over the deliberation of the Sarda Act. See 'The Sarda Act, political strategy and trends in discourse in the child marriage debate in India during the 1920's', unpub. M.A. diss., Jul. 1989, Hannover.

⁶⁷Opinion of M.G.Ranade in his letter 12 Feb.1885, From 'Papers relating to infant marriage and enforced widowhood in India', (Hereafter 'Papers relating to infant marriage'), Selections from the records, p.92.

race', and hence had to have a good grounding in health and hygiene in order to raise healthy and strong children.⁶⁸ In their approach to gender-related reform issues, one can discern the process of transformation of early liberal reformers into nationalists.

The failure to acknowledge gender inequalities in marital relationships is blatantly exposed in another trend within the male discourse. A majority of opinions by liberal and conservatives alike argued that women themselves were active proponents of the institution of child-marriage and opposed all reforms. Many more maintained that widows themselves did not want re-marriage and therefore such reforms need not be legislated upon but left to the passage of time.⁶⁹ An Inamdar of Dharwar, Tirmal Rao Venkatesh, skilfully drew a picture of the origins of infant-marriage as a recent phenomenon owing entirely to, 'the whims of females, belonging to rich families, who not only put up, but compel their male members to bring about infant-marriages...'⁷⁰ The reasons he cited were that mothers, sisters and female relatives of the bride and groom were doing so 'for the sake of enjoying fun and pleasure of going through the ceremonies attendant upon such marriages'.⁷¹ The non-interventionist or 'reform from within' group ~~however~~ considered women as the chief culprits because according to them, women in India were conservative by nature, that they imbibed the claptrap of Hindu tradition effectively first in their parents' homes and then in the in-laws' and by the time they reached middle age they personified orthodoxy themselves. Therefore, the only way of modernising Indian society was not by legislation but by educating women.⁷²

While feminists agreed that many women did block reforms yet after an analysis of the conservative attitudes of women they concluded that centuries of

⁶⁸Dr. K.R.Kirtikar, An address on the occasion of the second anniversary of the Saddharma Samaj of Thane (Bombay, 1883), pp.25-26.

⁶⁹A few examples of such opinions can be seen in the replies sent by Atmaram Pandurang, Dr. Vishram Ramji Ghollay, Veerchund Deepchand among many others. In 'Papers relating to infant marriage', Selections from the records.

⁷⁰Tirmal Rao Venkatesh's opinion, 30 Dec.1884, Ibid., p.55.

⁷¹Ibid., p.57.

⁷²The best representatives of this school are Pandurang Balibhadra, Narayan Bhikajee and Dr. Amroot Chobhe, Ibid.

conditioning brought⁷ about^{about?} by the male sex through the scriptures could not be wiped out in a few years. Meanwhile, state intervention was considered necessary. Rakhmabai summed up this analysis thus, 'reduced to this state of degradation by the dictum of the shastras, looked down upon for ages by men, we have naturally come to look down upon ourselves'.⁷³ Therefore, she pleaded that only abolition of child-marriage would enable the dissemination of higher education to restore the necessary sense of dignity and pride in women to plead their own cause.

Women's participation in the Age of Consent Bill debates

An important change in the women's movement of the 1890s was the role of the women's press in consciousness-raising as well as engaging with the dominant discourses on issues of female sexuality. The consequence of the lack of concern by men with the suffering of women on account of child-marriage, angered women to the extent that they wrote in the Marathi journals expressing their shock and disgust at the cowardice of men in facing reality. They followed the debates closely and had an opinion on all trends of the debates. A significant item in the women's literature of the time was restructuring the institution of marriage and thus arose an analysis of how and why this structure maintains absurd customs. The reasons for the existence of child-marriage proposed by them were radically different from those of the male discourse. There is no engagement with the Shastric injunctions on the primacy of the garbhadhana ceremony (gift of the womb, referring to the consummation of marriage) which characterised the dominant discourse. Instead they traced it to financial considerations on the boy-groom's parents, the anxiety of the girl-child's parents due to the low status accorded to the female sex, and a psychological need for a woman to be a mother-in-law.

State intervention in regulating marital reforms was actively proposed by women, which again is in contrast to the opinions of men on the same subject. Studied discourtesy and contempt of 'reformers' form an important link in understanding the implicit belief of women in the efficacy of the colonial government. After the replies of the male sections of Indian society to the Malabari proposals were published

⁷³'Infant marriage', Times of India, p.4.

women wrote profusely expressing their chagrin not at the 'opinions of old-fashioned, credulous and the God-fearing older generation', which they could comprehend but (what was unforgivable to them was) ^{at} the opinions of young learned men who aped modern ideas only in dress and diet but were actually worse than the conservative people'.⁷⁴ The reference here is to the 'reform from within' group of reformers who were against legislation. 'Sati', argued one lady, 'would never have been abolished, left to the Indian people, but was the greatest favour done by the British government, for saving thousands of lives of women from the agonies of the fire'.⁷⁵ They urged the government to show the same firmness in conviction ^{of} over the issue of the Age of Consent. Vernacular print literature of nineteenth century Maharashtra was an important vehicle for the construction of gender identities. One such prose genre was a form called stricharitra (lives and character delineation of women) by male writers.⁷⁶ The conservative groups in Poona had written and enacted stricharitras in connection with the Age of Consent Bill.⁷⁷ Much of the material in these plays contained wild and sensational portrayal of women who had remained unmarried due to the enactment of the Bill. The women's journals began a protest against this vilification of the female sex by the mainstream society. Bhamini Prakash, a women's journal based at Poona and edited by Chimabai Kadam was among the first to protest against these attacks. Women wrote articles condemning men for writing slander stories and against conservative newspapers like the Poona Vaibhav and Shri Shivaji which were publishing letters containing obscenities and indecent allusions targeted to the Bill by using female pseudonyms.⁷⁸

Of greater importance is this journal's role in writing to the government complaining about the character assassination of women taking place in this form of

⁷⁴Editorial, 'Social reform', Arya Bhagini, (Marathi), Jun.1891, p.51.

⁷⁵'By an educated lady', 'Instructive debates between Gulabbai and Shevatibai', Arya Bhagini (Marathi), Jul.1891, pp.60-61.

⁷⁶A good discussion of this genre is in Rosalind O'Hanlon's 'Introduction', to For the honour of my countrywomen (forthcoming), pp.56-68.

⁷⁷13 Jun.1891, (NNR).

⁷⁸Bhamini Prakash, summarised in 13 Jun.1891, (NNR).

literature. It requested the government to take action on two issues: firstly to provide stricter guidelines to curb the activities of irresponsible vernacular newspapers; ² secondly, to stop 'Dramatic Groups' from performing plays on the Age of Consent debates.⁷⁹ They also brought to the attention of the government ~~the~~ disturbing trends in the higher education of men. Apparently, the male students of the various Government Medical Colleges were participating in these performances which the journal noted as an extremely poor reflection on the values imbibed by such pupils. They requested the government to dismiss such students from the Colleges if they failed to withdraw from ^{the} enacting slanderous plays.

Support was sought by Maharashtrian women from the imperial female both for guidance and for mobilising strength for public propaganda. In nineteenth century British India, David Arnold has argued that the European medical man ² was effectively performing ^{not} the function of maintaining the image of physical and moral superiority of the ruling race.⁸⁰ It should be pointed out here that his counterpart - the imperial medical woman - ~~was also~~ ^{had} perpetuating the same function. Much of the medical evidence selectively cited by Indian women in support of the agitation came from imperial female doctors who gave fiery lectures on eugenist theories of weak and sterile populations issuing from the Indian race due to effects of child-marriage.⁸¹ Indian women, however, usually took only the maternal mortality figures to argue against child marriage. Women's reliance on the imperial female and the colonial government reflects significantly ~~on~~ the loss of faith in indigenous circles.

The growth of the women's movement ² under ~~the~~ separate female-institutions ² has been studied in Chapters One and Two. These women's organisations became crucial bodies for the popular participation of women in the Age of Consent debates. Some of their lobbying techniques and methods of agitation will be discussed here. The work of a Women's Committee in support of the Age of Consent Bill in Bombay

⁷⁹Bhamini Prakash, 20 Jun.1891, (NNR).

⁸⁰David Arnold, 'Medical priorities and practice in nineteenth century British India', South Asia Research, 5:2, Nov.1985, pp.167-83.

⁸¹Dr. Pechey Phipson, Address to the Hindus of Bombay on the subject of child-marriage, Bombay, 11 Oct.1890, Tracts/799, (IOL).

is reported in leading newspapers in the middle of the year 1890 which was comprised of prominent English and Maharashtrian women.⁸² Their counterpart in London was Millicent Fawcett who lobbied through the Indian National Association calling for legislative action by the government as an 'act of conscience'.⁸³ Thus the first memorial sent by women from the Bombay Presidency was accomplished with the collaboration of British feminists (from) Bombay and London. This memorial was addressed to the Queen with two thousand signatures of Maharashtrian women. Due to the intensely hostile atmosphere surrounding the debates, only the social position and caste of the signatories was revealed but their identity was to remain confidential.⁸⁴

The attention of the government was drawn by the memorialists to 'the necessity for legislation in the interests of child-wives and other female minors' and the remedy they sought was that 'the criminal law in India may be so altered as to protect at least girls under fourteen from their husbands as well as from strangers'.⁸⁵ The petitioners pointed out the absurdities and anomalies in the criminal law of 1860 which fixed the age of consent for English girls at twelve and for Indian girls at ten. They pointed to the anomaly in the law whereby a girl of eighteen cannot validly consent to grievous harm to her person but she could to rape. So also a girl under twelve could not validly consent to the removal of jewels on her person but she could to 'the theft of her honour'.⁸⁶ Finally they argued that the Queen's 'keen maternal interests' in her subject people would influence her to take action to redeem the status of her weakest subjects - womanhood of India and bring the law to par with the

⁸²Lady Reay, Dr. Pechey-Phipson comprised the British representatives and Indian women were Rakhmabai Modak, Pandita Ramabai, Dr. Rakhmabai.

⁸³22 Dec. 1890, Induprakash, p.3.

⁸⁴Many of the leading newspapers published this memorial verbatim. Mahratta, 14 Dec. 1890 and Induprakash, 6 Oct. 1890.

⁸⁵'Memorial of 1600 women of India to her Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria, Empress of India', sent by W. Lee Warner, Secretary to Government of Bombay, 30 Dec. 1890; In 'Papers relative to the Bill to amend the Indian Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure 1882, Extract from the Abstract of the Proceedings of the Council of the Governor-General of India, (hereafter Proceedings), Apr. 1891, P/3951, Appendix N.13, (IOL).

⁸⁶Memorial of 1600 women of India, Proceedings, Appendix N.

English laws.

Indian women (counter-)argued that girls in India normally did not attain maturity before fourteen. Indian feminists relied on and effectively used the information supplied to them through the medical discourses of European female doctors of India. Many of the European female doctors practising in India actively participated in social reform issues. They took special interest in the child-marriage controversy wherein they could speak with authority on Indian female sexuality based on their professional practice as well as their personal friendships with Indian women. In an important petition sent by European female doctors, they had compiled evidence from their practices to prove that child marriage resulted in child retardation and maternal mortality. More significantly, they argued that there were strong links between early consummation and sterile populations.⁸⁷ They specifically stated that the Indian custom of child marriage had an adverse effect on the sterility of Indian men and women.

A great deal of activity is reported amongst Indian women between the despatching of the first memorial in December 1890 and the deliberations of the Viceregal Council on the Bill in March 1891. At least eight women's meetings are reported to have been held in Western India and one in Bengal to consider aspects of the Bill and to pass resolutions and write new petitions. For example, in Calcutta under the leadership of Mrs. Ghosal, a private meeting of middle-aged Hindu women took place where they passed a resolution unanimously in favour of the Bill. In this context, she wrote to the Statesman:

Trustful of the government, the ladies hail any legislation that aims at an amelioration of the nameless doom to which among others, the married girlhood of India are subjected.⁸⁸

Between seventy-five to two hundred and fifty women are reported to have attended these meetings. Almost all of them took place in urban places like Bombay, Amravati,

⁸⁷See Memorial of lady doctors in India, signed by Monelle Mansell and 49 others, 22 Sept. 1890, Proceedings, Appendix A15.

⁸⁸Cited in 16 Feb.1891, Induprakash.

Poona and Ahmedabad. They were also comprised entirely of educated middle-class women. Two types of public participation are evident among women. They joined either as members of caste or religious-affiliated women's bodies or under the umbrella of secular women's organisations. Examples of the first kind are the Native Christian Women's Society, Zoroastrian Women's Club and the Bene-Israelite Women's Organisation. Illustrations of the second type are the Aryan Ladies Association and the Arya Mahila Samaj.

While women successfully adopted the new form of agitation of holding public discussions they condemned the recruiting techniques of their male counterparts.⁸⁹ An important item on their agenda was to inform the government of unscrupulous practices used by anti-legislationists. The orthodoxy in Maharashtra did feel the threat posed by women's meetings. Tilak, the leader of the opposition writing in the Kesari and Mahratta, registered the unity of women over the Bill but tried to dismiss their memorials as being ineffective.⁹⁰ Some sensational vernacular papers representing reactionary views reported that anti-legislationist groups would break the influence of liberal women by organising their wives and sisters to hold counter-meetings.⁹¹ However, no reports of such subversive meetings by women are recorded and merely suggest the intense fear of the orthodoxy.

The unprecedented ^{by us} traditionalist group's agitation against the Bill brought women ^{by us} fiThe unprecedented traditionalist group's agitation against the Bill brought increasingly discerned as a gendered one. Typically, in one such meeting, the speaker while arguing a case for firm commitment and unity of women said, 'The question concerns our most vital interests rather than of men[sic]'.⁹² Likewise, a woman

⁸⁹Awesome numbers of anti-legislationists were reported to have gathered in the Tulsi Bagh and Madhav Bagh meetings in Bombay. Leaflets carried such sensational messages as 'Violate your religion or suffer transportation for life'; 'Government interferes in domestic delicate matters'. On the basis of these advertising techniques anti-legislationists were able to get 10,000 signatures in a day. The Gujarati, 21 Feb.1891, (NNR) and Vartahar, 21 Feb.1891, (NNR).

⁹⁰28 Feb.1891, (NNR); Also The Mahratta, 6 Dec.1890, (NNR).

⁹¹Pune Vaibhav, 13 Dec.1890, (NNR); Other vernacular newspapers which condemned women's meetings and participation were Jagad-hitechchu, Vartahar and Hindu Punch, reported in 7 Mar.1891, (NNR).

⁹²Under 'Correspondence, Poona News', 2 Mar.1891, Induprakash, p.4

writing under the authority of a 'mother of several children', said that allowing a husband or stranger to have sexual intercourse with a pre-pubescent girl was an outrageous act. Further she added:

Women as a sex, were subject to and underwent far more excruciating pains and miseries and risks of the worst kind happening in child-bearing and child-birth, than man, the opposite sex, had ever conception of...⁹³

Therefore, she cautioned against listening to views of men as it was no index of what women went through and advised a severe punishment for men indulging in premature cohabitation. Women thus turned the age of consent issue into a case peculiar to the female sex where the experience of women was privileged over textual interpretations offered by men.

After the first memorial was sent, the proceedings of the women's meetings as well as their petitioning process reveal no further collaboration with British feminists during the passage of the Act. There is, however, no indication of a conflict between them either. If we compare the first memorial drafted with the help of British feminists addressed to the Queen to the later petitions we begin to understand the differential participation of Indian women under the leadership of their own female reformers. In the first memorial under the guidance of English women, the minimum age of consent for girls was drafted as fourteen years. But when no response was received by February 1891, they became anxious. Women leaders like Rakhmabai Modak and Dhaklibai Sukthankar reasoned that their first memorial was probably considered as unrealistic because the government found their demand for raising the age of consent to fourteen years as too high an age limit. Thus, it led to all future petitions pleading for for twelve years as the limit.⁹⁴ The second difference is discerned in the construction of arguments for raising the age of consent. While the first memorial concentrated on the anomalies of the Penal code the later petitions

⁹³8 Dec.1890, Induprakash.

⁹⁴Petition from the Aryan Ladies Association, Poona, by 65 Hindu ladies and 23 Bene-Israel ladies, Proceedings; Also the 'Petition of certain Parsi and native Christian ladies of Poona', 23 Feb.1891 to His Excellency The Governor-General of India, signed by 128 Parsi ladies and 83 Indian Christian ladies, in Proceedings, Appendix A12.

personalise the issue as one concerning the female sex. The five hundred and fourteen petitioners from the Arya Mahila Samaj argued that the misrepresentations against the Bill were by male oppositionists but as far as women were concerned:

The feeling in favour of the Age of Consent Bill among the female classes is indeed very general wherever the object of the Bill is correctly understood.⁹⁵

Thus, their petition made out the case that not only did the issue concern women only but it had the consent of the women of Maharashtra. The tone of the later petitions were also marked by caution which is missing in the first memorial. While some petitions requested guarantees against the misuse of the criminal process by vesting it in magistrates alone others asked a less severe punishment in the case of husbands guilty of breaching the Act.⁹⁶

This study has pointed to the role of women as agents. We have to address why agency was vested in the unique case of Maharashtrian women? ⁹⁷ An obvious feature that marks Maharashtrian women's consciousness from that of other regions is the building of separate female institutions in the late nineteenth century which allowed room for women as well as provided a common platform from which their collective voice could be heard. The organisations whether religion-based like that of Zoroastrian women or secular ones like the Arya Mahila Samaj had strong leaders under whose capable leadership women gained a confidence to speak out.

However, there were certain external factors too which contributed to the fruition in women's consciousness in Maharashtra. The social reform movement took

⁹⁵A petition from Dhaklibai Sukthankar, Secretary, Arya Mahila Samaj, Bombay, 4 Mar.1891 to K.L.Nulkar accompanied with Memorial of 514 native ladies of Bombay and Poona, Proceedings, Appendix A18.

⁹⁶A memorial adopted by 60 high caste Hindu women from Ahmadabad, reported in 25 Feb.1891, Times of India, p.5.

⁹⁷Existing historiography on the Age of Consent Bill debates as they evolved in the 1890s within Bengal do not tackle the question of agency amongst Bengali women.

a different course in Maharashtra from that of Bengal.⁹⁸ The specific case of the Age of Consent debate is a good illustration. In Bengal the debate hinged on the control of female sexuality which implicated Bengali women's sexual nature.⁹⁹ On the western coast, the debate became a nationalist issue in the hands of B.G.Tilak. ^{? social} Even for reformers like K.T.Telang it was to prove that social reform precedes political reform. Even to scholars like Bhandarkar who cited scriptural sanction for the postponement of the garbhadana ceremony it was eventually to prove that such procrastination of a religious ceremony was granted in the texts and therefore was no 'loss of religion' to the ordinary scripture-abiding-Hindu and no 'danger to Hinduism' as far as the larger society was concerned. The lines on which the debate was conducted by indigenous discourses necessarily sharpened the differences for women. Clarity marked the debate by women on the age of consent as they realised that it was a gender issue rather than a national or a religious contention.

Late nineteenth century Maharashtra saw the emergence of a regional discourse which had strong 'Maratha' nationalist elements. There is evidence of anxiety in the manner in which Maharashtrians painstakingly distinguished themselves from Bengal. After the publicising of the Phulmani case when a Bengali husband killed his pre-pubescent wife in the act of intercourse, Bengal was reported as a culturally backward region of India in Western Indian vernacular newspapers. Even the progressive groups in Western India cited speeches of R.C.Mitter or Sir Stuart Bayley and believed the many allegations on Bengali female sexuality. Their rationale was that in a region like Bengal where purdah was rife, and women were not allowed to look at men other than their close blood relations it was only natural that Bengali women were full of sexual

⁹⁸The social reform movement in Bombay was more circumspect and less revolutionary. The Bombay and Poona intellectuals who founded the Prarthana Samaj were eager to affect public opinion and developed practical ways of adjusting their convictions and practices to the existing social structure and thus found readier public acceptance. In Bengal it was fiery and did not therefore cut a popular base as seen in the Brahmos who, no doubt created an integrated new philosophy of life but separated themselves from the society at large. Other details of these variations are to be found in Heimsath, Indian nationalism, p.14, pp.86-87, pp.104-8.

⁹⁹Dagmar Engels has argued convincingly that the age of consent debate was a reflection of two opposing views of sexuality as represented by the Bengali and the British, 'The age of consent act, 1891', South Asia Research, 3:2, 1985, pp.107-34.

thoughts and craved for the company of their husbands before puberty!¹⁰⁰ On the other side of the coin they represented Maharashtrian women as purdah-free and the region's cultural practices which made consummation of marriage before puberty an exception. Significantly, this argument characterised a great number of both legislationists and anti-legislationists in Bombay. The tone and colour of the indigenous debates in Maharashtra at once freed women from defending their sexuality and simultaneously set up an agenda on which they could participate on equal terms. This is epitomised in the arguments used by female petitioners who agreed that consummation of marriage before the girl reached the age of twelve was indeed rare in Maharashtra but the government had to recognise the existence of the practice in other regions of India and make provisions against it.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

A study of a multiplicity of discourses over social legislation in late nineteenth century Maharashtra has been undertaken in this chapter which points to several important features of such an interaction.

The Dadaji versus Rakhmabai episode was a historical moment which was a moment of confrontation as much as it was one of differentiation. It provided an opportunity wherein the state started a process of negotiation with its subjects by opening debates on gender-related legislative acts. The colonial invitation to indigenous elites to deliberate on the restitution of conjugal rights and its eventual resolution of non-interference with the law was not just a coincidental union of opinion between the two over who governed female sexuality. In a wider sense, by consulting Indian men, the state maintained its public facade of an egalitarian rule wherein its authority seemed to be embedded in civil opinion. In its ultimate resolution that any interference with the regulations governing conjugal rights would disturb the social order and prove to be a source of chaos re-created the state's political function of upholding law and order.

¹⁰⁰Sudharak, in 24 Jan.1891, (NNR); Subodh Patrika, 21 Feb.1891, (NNR); Indian Spectator, in 14 Feb.1891, (NNR).

¹⁰¹Petition from Sec, Arya Mahila Samaj, Bombay, Proceedings, Appendix N, (IOL).

While it appears over the deliberations of the restitution of conjugal rights that women were neither treated nor could act as agents, yet the Age of Consent debates proves the contrary. Not only were women able to make their opinion known through their writings and their own press; they also actively participated in every strand of the debate through memorials and meetings. Women's participation in the Age of Consent debates did not come out of a void but was gradually formed through their separate institution building programmes. Women's role in the popular agitations of the Age of Consent effectively pushes back their participation in popular protest movements to the nineteenth century. The most striking difference between the dominant male discourse and that of women over marital rights and female sexuality is the latter's construction of a gendered critique of the marriage institutions of India as opposed to the constructs of the former which were largely based on the 'duties' of women. A second important difference was the reliance of women on experience as an index for making judgments rather than ^{or} a textual analysis as the dominant discourse tended to do. In this sense, it is suggested that the enduring contribution of women in this debate was their context-over-text arguments. Finally, women's pressure-groups were able to influence liberal members within the viceregal council in passing the Age of Consent Bill of 1891.

CONCLUSIONS

A study of the emerging complexities of feminist consciousness in Maharashtra during the social reform movement and the early nationalist period has formed the focus of this thesis. The thesis points conclusively to Maharashtrian women as agents in determining, to a great extent, the course of their lives through the analysis of the key concepts of women's identity and autonomy, women's assertion and resistance, women's power and protest, within the wider context of colonial political and social relations.

The socio-religious reform movements of the late nineteenth century created an opening for women to examine, reflect and debate on the 'condition of women' in contemporary society and their position in Hinduism - the dominant religion. The first chapter has demonstrated how certain Christian women arrived at a feminist position through a critique and rejection of Hinduism. Christianity provided a point of interrogation of Hinduism. For first- and second-generation Christian women their religion gave the necessary strength to counter opposition and forge links with the liberal West. The strength of their convictions came at least partly from the autonomy they gained through their funding from non-Indian charities which enabled them to start educational institutions, widows' homes, social welfare activities and build a women's movement under the leadership of charismatic women like Pandita Ramabai. To women of their time they were path-breakers both by their feminist critiques and by providing what we would describe today as alternative life-styles. Hindu women were directly or indirectly infused with courage and confidence by such influential Christian women.

The empowerment of Christian women took place not through a wholesale but a selective borrowing from Christian discourse. Indian Christian women maintained a cultural distance from European Christianity. Their refusal to belong to any one church as well as their rejection of clerical mediation demonstrated the indigenous roots of their feminism. Their refusal to bind themselves to Western definitions of Christianity as well as their own understanding of the Indian past made them sensitive to missionary racism and critical of the state when the latter affected women's interests adversely. During the socio-religious reform period an individual's identity was announced through his or her religious affiliation and Christian women were able

to sustain women's interests only as long as the active phase of the reform movement lasted. However, Christian women were unable to counter the nationalist ideologies of the early twentieth century with new strategies. Christian feminists were eventually marginalised with the take-over of the women's movement by Hindu women under the leadership of Ramabai Ranade.

A large number of Hindu women analysed their position and status within Indian society and Hindu religion but unlike their Christian counterparts they did not reject their religion totally. Instead they limited their engagement to a critique of the priestly classes and traced their oppression to certain social customs and practices. This process was analysed in Chapter Two wherein Hindu women's critique of the 'condition of women' has been examined through their debates on dowry, widowhood and domestic and social reform issues. It is suggested that their critique was constrained by several factors. The first-generation feminists were largely educated through the initiatives of indigenous elites. Emotionally and intellectually Hindu women owed a great debt to the enthusiasm and encouragement of the male reformers thus creating a delicate balance of power between them. That their benefactors were liberal men made any autonomous moves extremely difficult and undiplomatic.

However, several Hindu female leaders overcame this obstacle by adopting a strategy of assimilation and accommodation. The vehicle for the movement of Hindu women's consciousness proved to be the separate female institution-building programmes of women. These institutions were public bodies with the executive and managerial positions being controlled by women. These institutional bases gave them the necessary autonomy while their strategy of assimilation and accommodation appeased the conservative sections of society. The successful functioning of some of these separate organisations in attracting large numbers of women to their programmes have been traced in Chapter Two.

The idea of a separate but public sphere of activity was no doubt a sagacious solution for Hindu women desirous of effecting changes in women's lives within the constraints of Hindu society, yet it ultimately restricted the growth of an independent women's movement. In the early twentieth century the anxiety of women regarding the safeguarding of their interests took on an urgency due to the almost certain victory of the political reform school of thought over the social reformists. This basically

meant that even old-style reformers were no longer in a position of strength to support women's welfare schemes. This anxiety was reflected in some of the separate female institutions, like the Seva Sadan, which, in a bid to safeguard women's interests, would not allow its members to participate in political organisations associated with nationalist activities. Due to the nature of these institutions, the separate female organisations were not able to fulfil all the aspirations of their members. The discussion of Hindu women's engagement with the 'golden age' theory undertaken in Chapter Two shows that they were not only unwilling to break with the past, but approved vigorously their reconstituted images of Indian womanhood from the past. The uncritical appraisal of the past was a contrast to their Christian sisters, and, posed several problems. While the representation of Indian womanhood taken from the Vedic past was indeed a glorious one (she was a woman who had equal rights vis-a-vis man, she was educated, had choice in marriage and re-marriage, and could hold her own with any man), female leaders made no efforts to distinguish the functions of their own representations of Indian womanhood from that of nationalists and religious revivalists. Thus, it can be surmised that women were attracted to the re-drawn images of Indian womanhood presented to them by Gandhi as the latter's resembled their own leaders' representations with the added incentive of equal participation in the forbidden arena of political movements.

The processes by which discourse is informed by practice is explored in Chapters Three and Four. Women's assertion and resistance form the twin themes of these chapters. Maharashtrian women's bid to assert rights to property, livelihood, mobility and marriage show that the oppressor was not always their own menfolk or the state. The case of kalavantins given in Chapter Three, shows that their erosion of rights to gainful employment were not obstructed merely by the state, but their resistance proved futile in the face of the drive for respectability by middle-class women. It is argued here that class factors thus equally determine women's status as they do men's and much more significant is the process by which oppression of one class of women by another can take place. Yet another form of resistance by women is shown through the symbolic reversal of roles in women's literature. This type of resistance derives meaning from the desire of women to redress unequal gender-relations through a medium by which they could draw the attention of indigenous men

sharply to their disaffection with the existing state of affairs. Women's resistance expressed through plays which were often staged were able to evoke responses from actors and audiences equally, and were thus, able to go beyond symbolic resistance.

One significant feature of Chapter Three is the rapid erosion of the marital rights of women despite their protest at the displacement of customary law and its replacement by Anglo-Hindu legal procedures. The effect of such drastic interventions by the state is further elaborated in Chapter Four which discusses women's crime as a form of resistance. The attempts of women to assert their right to re-marry on account of cruelty by husbands was not granted by the courts. In many cases women tried to rid themselves of violent husbands through unlawful means (poisoning of husbands). Likewise, the act of infanticide when committed by widows was the effect of women's defiance of Brahminic injunctions on eternal widowhood. These chapters suggest the highly interventionist nature of the colonial state and the gradual encroachment by the codified law on women's rights in areas of marriage and divorce. Chapter Four has shown how the nineteenth-century penal code increasingly defined the mother alone as the perpetrator of the act of infanticide while the women's petitions show the complex nature and multiple causes of the 'crime' of infanticide. Thus it is suggested that any study of women's 'crime' has to be situated in the wider context of the gender and social relationships and the interaction of local elites with state power. Finally these chapters (three and four) affirm that female agency can be studied in women's individual or collective initiatives in negotiating with various types of power relations in an everyday context.

The interaction between the state and indigenous elites over the issues of the higher education for women, social legislation like that of the restitution of conjugal rights, divorce and the age of consent debates of the late nineteenth century, reveals the complex nature of the power relations between ruler and ruled. The contest between the coloniser and the colonised were enacted over the 'condition of woman' issues, but the processes show that state power was far from hegemonic but one of a bargaining kind. In the debates over social legislation the government invited the indigenous elites to speak and pronounce on the proper sphere and duties of Indian women. Whenever it was found that Indian men were opposed to a certain change in the laws governing gender-relations, those laws remained unchanged, especially when

they agreed with the gender ideology of Victorian colonial administrators. This process is illustrated by the restitution of conjugal rights and divorce debates. The gender-related social reform issues of the nineteenth century found a bone of contention in the cultural contest between the colonial state and Indian men. Through a process of pressure, compromise and concessions the state enrolled indigenous elites as agents of colonial rule.

This study has also pointed to the fact that we cannot fruitfully claim to understand the ideology of women's organisations operating in the nationalist era without a study of their predecessors. Late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century women's organisations like that of the Arya Mahila Samaj and the Seva Sadan, did not consider older values of motherhood and nurturing as incompatible with the new values of ambition and individual initiative. Moreover, female identity was not imbued with shame or inferiority but was a source of pride. They celebrated femininity as a privilege granted to women over men. Even their symbolic role-reversals in literature demonstrated that they held a world-view wherein men and women did not compete but were equals. In this context, it is easier to understand the standpoint of prominent Indian women of the later nationalist period of the 30s and 40s who ferociously differentiated Indian from Western feminism as one not marked by male-hatred.

Agency does not arise out of isolation but as a response to oppression which can and does emanate from various sources of power-relations. This thesis has analysed women's actions as an interaction with various dominant discourses. Thus we see women contesting the knowledge claimed by missionaries, colonialists, nationalists and religious revivalists over issues of female sexuality. A significant theme in this study is revealing the process by which women empower themselves effectively when they challenge the knowledge about womanhood claimed by dominant discourse. Their enduring contribution was their context-over-text arguments. They were able to challenge textual representations of womanhood by situating their critiques in the reality of their material existence. Thus they turn into agents when they privilege experience over norm and practice over prescription. By analysing women's role in the Age of Consent debates this study shows that public participation by women in protest movements began in the late nineteenth-century, contrary to the

claims of current historiography. Similarly, the interaction of women with the movements for medical aid and education of women sharpened their awareness of the racially discriminatory policies of colonial medical men and women. Maharashtrian women aspiring for careers realised that their economic independence and any semblance of a life of self-respect and dignity could not be attained without a political consciousness too. Therefore, great numbers of educated women joined the nationalist struggles. Their political participation can be attributed to a conscious choice rather than the naive explanation offered by current historiography that they were lured into Indian politics by the charismatic figure of Gandhi.

Finally, the thesis points to the conclusion that gender systems significantly shape, and are shaped by, a great variety of power-relationships especially in a colonial context. Thus, the study ends by arguing for the re-integration of gender history within the mainstream history of India.

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